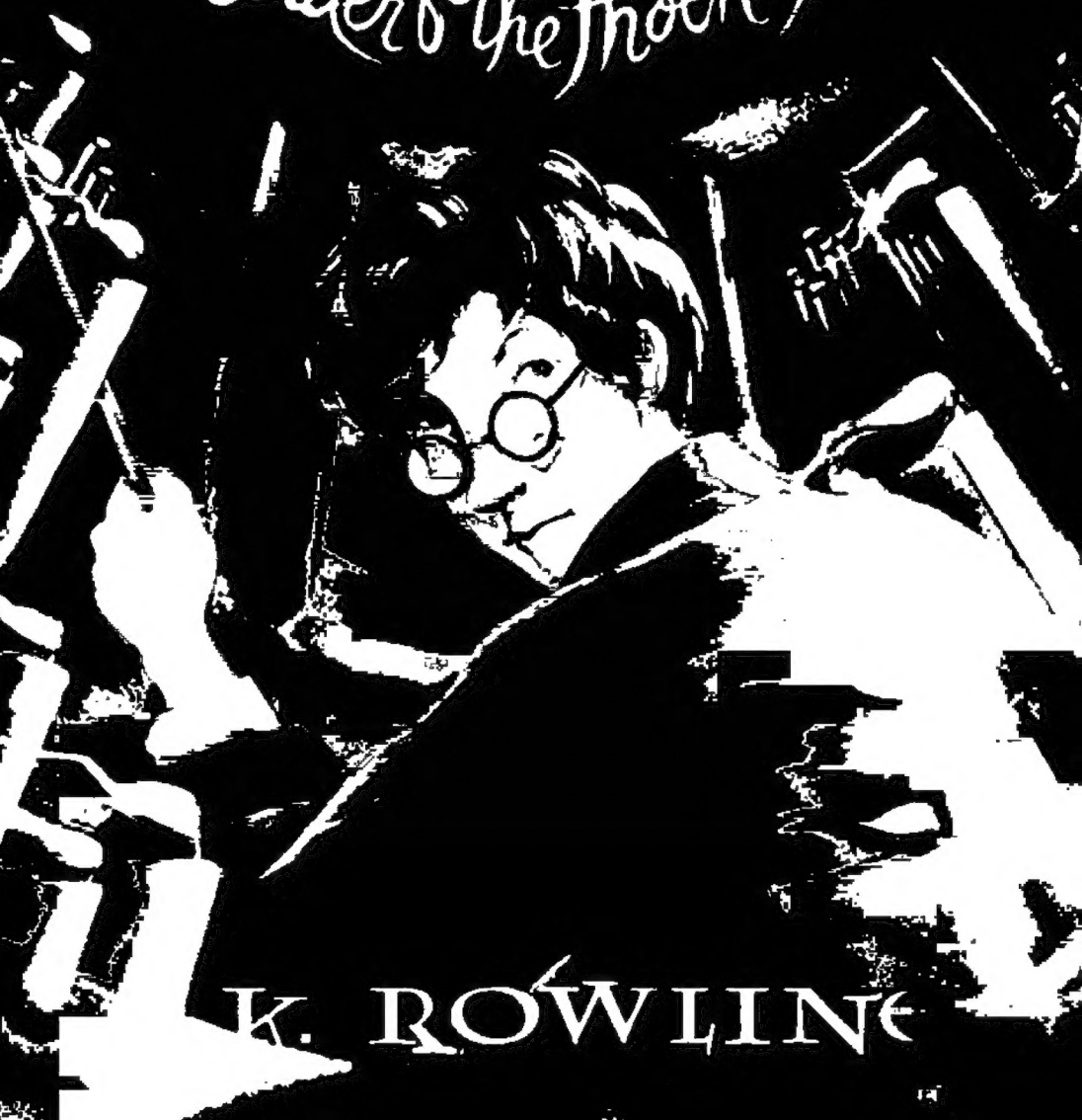


Harry Potter

and the Order of the Phoenix



K. ROWLING

HARRY POTTER
AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX



BY
J.K. ROWLING

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARY GRANDPRÉ

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*TO NEIL, JESSICA, AND DAVID,
WHO MAKE MY WORLD MAGICAL.*

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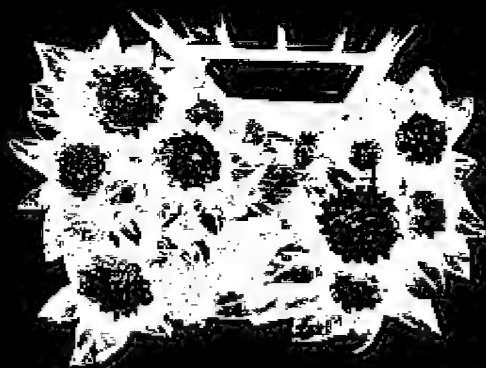
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CHAPTER ONE



DUDLEY DEMENTED

The hottest day of the summer so far was drawing to a close and a drowsy silence lay over the large, square houses of Privet Drive. Cars that were usually gleaming stood dusty in their drives and lawns that were once emerald green lay parched and yellowing; the use of hosepipes had been banned due to drought. Deprived of their usual car-washing and lawn-mowing pursuits, the inhabitants of Privet Drive had retreated into the shade of their cool houses, windows thrown wide in the hope of tempting in a nonexistent breeze. The only person left outdoors was a teenage boy who was lying flat on his back in a flower bed outside number four.

He was a skinny, black-haired, bespectacled boy who had the pinched, slightly unhealthy look of someone who has grown a lot in a short space of time. His jeans were torn and dirty, his T-shirt baggy and faded, and the soles of his trainers were peeling away from the

uppers. Harry Potter's appearance did not endear him to the neighbors, who were the sort of people who thought scruffiness ought to be punishable by law, but as he had hidden himself behind a large hydrangea bush this evening he was quite invisible to passersby. In fact, the only way he would be spotted was if his Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia stuck their heads out of the living room window and looked straight down into the flower bed below.

On the whole, Harry thought he was to be congratulated on his idea of hiding here. He was not, perhaps, very comfortable lying on the hot, hard earth, but on the other hand, nobody was glaring at him, grinding their teeth so loudly that he could not hear the news, or shooting nasty questions at him, as had happened every time he had tried sitting down in the living room and watching television with his aunt and uncle.

Almost as though this thought had fluttered through the open window, Vernon Dursley, Harry's uncle, suddenly spoke. "Glad to see the boy's stopped trying to butt in. Where is he anyway?"

"I don't know," said Aunt Petunia unconcernedly. "Not in the house."

Uncle Vernon grunted.

"*Watching the news . . .*" he said scathingly. "I'd like to know what he's really up to. As if a normal boy cares what's on the news — Dudley hasn't got a clue what's going on, doubt he knows who the Prime Minister is! Anyway, it's not as if there'd be anything about *his* lot on *our* news —"

"Vernon, *shh!*" said Aunt Petunia. "The window's open!"

"Oh — yes — sorry, dear . . ."

The Dursleys fell silent. Harry listened to a jingle about Fruit 'N Bran breakfast cereal while he watched Mrs. Figg, a batty, cat-loving old lady from nearby Wisteria Walk, amble slowly past. She was frowning and muttering to herself. Harry was very pleased that he was concealed behind the bush; Mrs. Figg had recently taken to asking him around for tea whenever she met him in the street. She had rounded the corner and vanished from view before Uncle Vernon's voice floated out of the window again.

"Dudders out for tea?"

"At the Polkisses'," said Aunt Petunia fondly. "He's got so many little friends, he's so popular . . ."

Harry repressed a snort with difficulty. The Dursleys really were astonishingly stupid about their son, Dudley; they had swallowed all his dim-witted lies about having tea with a different member of his gang every night of the summer holidays. Harry knew perfectly well that Dudley had not been to tea anywhere; he and his gang spent every evening vandalizing the play park, smoking on street corners, and throwing stones at passing cars and children. Harry had seen them at it during his evening walks around Little Whinging; he had spent most of the holidays wandering the streets, scavenging newspapers from bins along the way.

The opening notes of the music that heralded the seven o'clock news reached Harry's ears and his stomach turned over. Perhaps tonight — after a month of waiting — would be the night —

"Record numbers of stranded holidaymakers fill airports as the Spanish baggage-handlers' strike reaches its second week —"

"Give 'em a lifelong siesta, I would," snarled Uncle Vernon over

the end of the newsreader's sentence, but no matter. Outside in the flower bed, Harry's stomach seemed to unclench. If anything had happened, it would surely have been the first item on the news; death and destruction were more important than stranded holidaymakers . . .

He let out a long, slow breath and stared up at the brilliant blue sky. Every day this summer had been the same: the tension, the expectation, the temporary relief, and then mounting tension again . . . and always, growing more insistent all the time, the question of *why* nothing had happened yet . . .

He kept listening, just in case there was some small clue, not recognized for what it really was by the Muggles — an unexplained disappearance, perhaps, or some strange accident . . . but the baggage-handlers' strike was followed by news on the drought in the Southeast ("I hope he's listening next door!" bellowed Uncle Vernon, "with his sprinklers on at three in the morning!"); then a helicopter that had almost crashed in a field in Surrey, then a famous actress's divorce from her famous husband ("as if we're interested in their sordid affairs," sniffed Aunt Petunia, who had followed the case obsessively in every magazine she could lay her bony hands on).

Harry closed his eyes against the now blazing evening sky as the newsreader said, "And finally, Bungy the budgie has found a novel way of keeping cool this summer. Bungy, who lives at the Five Feathers in Barnsley, has learned to water-ski! Mary Dorkins went to find out more . . ."

Harry opened his eyes again. If they had reached water-skiing budgerigars, there was nothing else worth hearing. He rolled

cautiously onto his front and raised himself onto his knees and elbows, preparing to crawl out from under the window.

He had moved about two inches when several things happened in very quick succession.

A loud, echoing *crack* broke the sleepy silence like a gunshot; a cat streaked out from under a parked car and flew out of sight; a shriek, a bellowed oath, and the sound of breaking china came from the Dursleys' living room, and as though Harry had been waiting for this signal, he jumped to his feet, at the same time pulling from the waistband of his jeans a thin wooden wand as if he were unsheathing a sword. But before he could draw himself up to full height, the top of his head collided with the Dursleys' open window, and the resultant crash made Aunt Petunia scream even louder.

Harry felt as if his head had been split in two; eyes streaming, he swayed, trying to focus on the street and spot the source of the noise, but he had barely staggered upright again when two large purple hands reached through the open window and closed tightly around his throat.

"Put — it — away!" Uncle Vernon snarled into Harry's ear. *"Now! Before — anyone — sees!"*

"Get — off — me!" Harry gasped; for a few seconds they struggled, Harry pulling at his uncle's sausage-like fingers with his left hand, his right maintaining a firm grip on his raised wand. Then, as the pain in the top of Harry's head gave a particularly nasty throb, Uncle Vernon yelped and released Harry as though he had received an electric shock — some invisible force seemed to have surged through his nephew, making him impossible to hold.

Panting, Harry fell forward over the hydrangea bush, straightened up, and stared around. There was no sign of what had caused the loud cracking noise, but there were several faces peering through various nearby windows. Harry stuffed his wand hastily back into his jeans and tried to look innocent.

“Lovely evening!” shouted Uncle Vernon, waving at Mrs. Number Seven, who was glaring from behind her net curtains. “Did you hear that car backfire just now? Gave Petunia and me quite a turn!”

He continued to grin in a horrible, manic way until all the curious neighbors had disappeared from their various windows, then the grin became a grimace of rage as he beckoned Harry back toward him.

Harry moved a few steps closer, taking care to stop just short of the point at which Uncle Vernon’s outstretched hands could resume their strangling.

“What the *devil* do you mean by it, boy?” asked Uncle Vernon in a croaky voice that trembled with fury.

“What do I mean by what?” said Harry coldly. He kept looking left and right up the street, still hoping to see the person who had made the cracking noise.

“Making a racket like a starting pistol right outside our —”

“I didn’t make that noise,” said Harry firmly.

Aunt Petunia’s thin, horsey face now appeared beside Uncle Vernon’s wide, purple one. She looked livid.

“Why were you lurking under our window?”

“Yes — yes, good point, Petunia! *What were you doing under our window, boy?*”

“Listening to the news,” said Harry in a resigned voice.

His aunt and uncle exchanged looks of outrage.

“Listening to the news! *Again?* ”

“Well, it changes every day, you see,” said Harry.

“Don’t you be clever with me, boy! I want to know what you’re really up to — and don’t give me any more of this *listening to the news* tosh! You know perfectly well that *your lot* . . . ”

“Careful, Vernon!” breathed Aunt Petunia, and Uncle Vernon lowered his voice so that Harry could barely hear him, “. . . that *your lot* don’t get on *our* news!”

“That’s all you know,” said Harry.

The Dursleys goggled at him for a few seconds, then Aunt Petunia said, “You’re a nasty little liar. What are all those —” she too lowered her voice so that Harry had to lip-read the next word, “— *owls* — doing if they’re not bringing you news?”

“Aha!” said Uncle Vernon in a triumphant whisper. “Get out of that one, boy! As if we didn’t know you get all your news from those pestilential birds!”

Harry hesitated for a moment. It cost him something to tell the truth this time, even though his aunt and uncle could not possibly know how bad Harry felt at admitting it.

“The owls . . . aren’t bringing me news,” said Harry tonelessly.

“I don’t believe it,” said Aunt Petunia at once.

“No more do I,” said Uncle Vernon forcefully.

“We know you’re up to something funny,” said Aunt Petunia.

“We’re not stupid, you know,” said Uncle Vernon.

“Well, *that’s* news to me,” said Harry, his temper rising, and

before the Dursleys could call him back, he had wheeled about, crossed the front lawn, stepped over the low garden wall, and was striding off up the street.

He was in trouble now and he knew it. He would have to face his aunt and uncle later and pay the price for his rudeness, but he did not care very much just at the moment; he had much more pressing matters on his mind.

Harry was sure that the cracking noise had been made by someone Apparating or Disapparating. It was exactly the sound Dobby the house-elf made when he vanished into thin air. Was it possible that Dobby was here in Privet Drive? Could Dobby be following him right at this very moment? As this thought occurred he wheeled around and stared back down Privet Drive, but it appeared to be completely deserted again and Harry was sure that Dobby did not know how to become invisible . . .

He walked on, hardly aware of the route he was taking, for he had pounded these streets so often lately that his feet carried him to his favorite haunts automatically. Every few steps he glanced back over his shoulder. Someone magical had been near him as he lay among Aunt Petunia's dying begonias, he was sure of it. Why hadn't they spoken to him, why hadn't they made contact, why were they hiding now?

And then, as his feeling of frustration peaked, his certainty leaked away.

Perhaps it hadn't been a magical sound after all. Perhaps he was so desperate for the tiniest sign of contact from the world to which he belonged that he was simply overreacting to perfectly ordinary

noises. Could he be *sure* it hadn't been the sound of something breaking inside a neighbor's house?

Harry felt a dull, sinking sensation in his stomach and, before he knew it, the feeling of hopelessness that had plagued him all summer rolled over him once again . . .

Tomorrow morning he would be awoken by the alarm at five o'clock so that he could pay the owl that delivered the *Daily Prophet* — but was there any point in continuing to take it? Harry merely glanced at the front page before throwing it aside these days; when the idiots who ran the paper finally realized that Voldemort was back it would be headline news, and that was the only kind Harry cared about.

If he was lucky, there would also be owls carrying letters from his best friends, Ron and Hermione, though any expectation he had had that their letters would bring him news had long since been dashed.

"We can't say much about you-know-what, obviously. . . ."
"We've been told not to say anything important in case our letters go astray. . . ." *"We're quite busy but I can't give you details here. . . ."* *"There's a fair amount going on, we'll tell you everything when we see you. . . ."*

But when were they going to see him? Nobody seemed too bothered with a precise date. Hermione had scribbled, *"I expect we'll be seeing you quite soon"* inside his birthday card, but how soon was soon? As far as Harry could tell from the vague hints in their letters, Hermione and Ron were in the same place, presumably at Ron's parents' house. He could hardly bear to think of the pair of them having fun at the Burrow when he was stuck in Privet Drive. In

fact, he was so angry at them that he had thrown both their birthday presents of Honeydukes chocolates away unopened, though he had regretted this after eating the wilting salad Aunt Petunia had provided for dinner that night.

And what were Ron and Hermione busy with? Why wasn't he, Harry, busy? Hadn't he proved himself capable of handling much more than they? Had they all forgotten what he had done? Hadn't it been *he* who had entered that graveyard and watched Cedric being murdered and been tied to that tombstone and nearly killed . . . ?

Don't think about that, Harry told himself sternly for the hundredth time that summer. It was bad enough that he kept revisiting the graveyard in his nightmares, without dwelling on it in his waking moments too.

He turned a corner into Magnolia Crescent; halfway along he passed the narrow alleyway down the side of a garage where he had first clapped eyes on his godfather. Sirius, at least, seemed to understand how Harry was feeling; admittedly his letters were just as empty of proper news as Ron and Hermione's, but at least they contained words of caution and consolation instead of tantalizing hints:

"I know this must be frustrating for you. . . ." *"Keep your nose clean and everything will be okay. . . ."* *"Be careful and don't do anything rash. . . ."*

Well, thought Harry, as he crossed Magnolia Crescent, turned into Magnolia Road, and headed toward the darkening play park, he had (by and large) done as Sirius advised; he had at least resisted the temptation to tie his trunk to his broomstick and set off for the

Burrow by himself. In fact Harry thought his behavior had been very good considering how frustrated and angry he felt at being stuck in Privet Drive this long, reduced to hiding in flower beds in the hope of hearing something that might point to what Lord Voldemort was doing. Nevertheless, it was quite galling to be told not to be rash by a man who had served twelve years in the wizard prison, Azkaban, escaped, attempted to commit the murder he had been convicted for in the first place, then gone on the run with a stolen hippogriff.

Harry vaulted over the locked park gate and set off across the parched grass. The park was as empty as the surrounding streets. When he reached the swings he sank onto the only one that Dudley and his friends had not yet managed to break, coiled one arm around the chain, and stared moodily at the ground. He would not be able to hide in the Dursleys' flower bed again. Tomorrow he would have to think of some fresh way of listening to the news. In the meantime, he had nothing to look forward to but another restless, disturbed night, because even when he escaped nightmares about Cedric he had unsettling dreams about long dark corridors, all finishing in dead ends and locked doors, which he supposed had something to do with the trapped feeling he had when he was awake. Often the old scar on his forehead prickled uncomfortably, but he did not fool himself that Ron or Hermione or Sirius would find that very interesting anymore. . . . In the past his scar hurting had warned that Voldemort was getting stronger again, but now that Voldemort was back they would probably remind him that its regular irritation was only to be expected. . . . Nothing to worry about. . . . old news. . . .

The injustice of it all welled up inside him so that he wanted to

yell with fury. If it hadn't been for him, nobody would even have known Voldemort was back! And his reward was to be stuck in Little Whinging for four solid weeks, completely cut off from the magical world, reduced to squatting among dying begonias so that he could hear about water-skiing budgerigars! How could Dumbledore have forgotten him so easily? Why had Ron and Hermione got together without inviting him along too? How much longer was he supposed to endure Sirius telling him to sit tight and be a good boy, or resist the temptation to write to the stupid *Daily Prophet* and point out that Voldemort had returned? These furious thoughts whirled around in Harry's head, and his insides writhed with anger as a sultry, velvety night fell around him, the air full of the smell of warm, dry grass and the only sound that of the low grumble of traffic on the road beyond the park railings.

He did not know how long he had sat on the swing before the sound of voices interrupted his musings and he looked up. The streetlamps from the surrounding roads were casting a misty glow strong enough to silhouette a group of people making their way across the park. One of them was singing a loud, crude song. The others were laughing. A soft ticking noise came from several expensive racing bikes that they were wheeling along.

Harry knew who those people were. The figure in front was unmistakably his cousin, Dudley Dursley, wending his way home, accompanied by his faithful gang.

Dudley was as vast as ever, but a year's hard dieting and the discovery of a new talent had wrought quite a change in his physique. As Uncle Vernon delightedly told anyone who would listen, Dudley

had recently become the Junior Heavyweight Inter-School Boxing Champion of the Southeast. "The noble sport," as Uncle Vernon called it, had made Dudley even more formidable than he had seemed to Harry in the primary school days when he had served as Dudley's first punching bag. Harry was not remotely afraid of his cousin anymore but he still didn't think that Dudley learning to punch harder and more accurately was cause for celebration. Neighborhood children all around were terrified of him — even more terrified than they were of "that Potter boy," who, they had been warned, was a hardened hooligan who attended St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys.

Harry watched the dark figures crossing the grass and wondered whom they had been beating up tonight. *Look round*, Harry found himself thinking as he watched them. *Come on . . . look round . . . I'm sitting here all alone. . . . Come and have a go. . . .*

If Dudley's friends saw him sitting here, they would be sure to make a beeline for him, and what would Dudley do then? He wouldn't want to lose face in front of the gang, but he'd be terrified of provoking Harry . . . It would be really fun to watch Dudley's dilemma; to taunt him, watch him, with him powerless to respond . . . and if any of the others tried hitting Harry, Harry was ready — he had his wand . . . let them try . . . He'd love to vent some of his frustration on the boys who had once made his life hell —

But they did not turn around, they did not see him, they were almost at the railings. Harry mastered the impulse to call after them . . . Seeking a fight was not a smart move . . . He must not use magic . . . He would be risking expulsion again . . .

Dudley's gang's voices died; they were out of sight, heading along Magnolia Road.

There you go, Sirius, Harry thought dully. Nothing rash. Kept my nose clean. Exactly the opposite of what you'd have done . . .

He got to his feet and stretched. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon seemed to feel that whenever Dudley turned up was the right time to be home, and anytime after that was much too late. Uncle Vernon had threatened to lock Harry in the shed if he came home after Dudley again, so, stifling a yawn, still scowling, Harry set off toward the park gate.

Magnolia Road, like Privet Drive, was full of large, square houses with perfectly manicured lawns, all owned by large, square owners who drove very clean cars similar to Uncle Vernon's. Harry preferred Little Whinging by night, when the curtained windows made patches of jewel-bright colors in the darkness and he ran no danger of hearing disapproving mutters about his "delinquent" appearance when he passed the householders. He walked quickly, so that halfway along Magnolia Road Dudley's gang came into view again; they were saying their farewells at the entrance to Magnolia Crescent. Harry stepped into the shadow of a large lilac tree and waited.

" . . . squealed like a pig, didn't he?" Malcolm was saying, to guffaws from the others.

"Nice right hook, Big D," said Piers.

"Same time tomorrow?" said Dudley.

"Round at my place, my parents are out," said Gordon.

"See you then," said Dudley.

“Bye Dud!”

“See ya, Big D!”

Harry waited for the rest of the gang to move on before setting off again. When their voices had faded once more he headed around the corner into Magnolia Crescent and by walking very quickly he soon came within hailing distance of Dudley, who was strolling along at his ease, humming tunelessly.

“Hey, Big D!”

Dudley turned.

“Oh,” he grunted. “It’s you.”

“How long have you been ‘Big D’ then?” said Harry.

“Shut it,” snarled Dudley, turning away again.

“Cool name,” said Harry, grinning and falling into step beside his cousin. “But you’ll always be Ickle Diddykins to me.”

“I said, SHUT IT!” said Dudley, whose ham-like hands had curled into fists.

“Don’t the boys know that’s what your mum calls you?”

“Shut your face.”

“You don’t tell *her* to shut her face. What about ‘popkin’ and ‘Dinky Diddydums,’ can I use them then?”

Dudley said nothing. The effort of keeping himself from hitting Harry seemed to be demanding all his self-control.

“So who’ve you been beating up tonight?” Harry asked, his grin fading. “Another ten-year-old? I know you did Mark Evans two nights ago —”

“He was asking for it,” snarled Dudley.

“Oh yeah?”

“He cheeked me.”

“Yeah? Did he say you look like a pig that’s been taught to walk on its hind legs? ’Cause that’s not cheek, Dud, that’s true . . .”

A muscle was twitching in Dudley’s jaw. It gave Harry enormous satisfaction to know how furious he was making Dudley; he felt as though he was siphoning off his own frustration into his cousin, the only outlet he had.

They turned right down the narrow alleyway where Harry had first seen Sirius and which formed a shortcut between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk. It was empty and much darker than the streets it linked because there were no streetlamps. Their footsteps were muffled between garage walls on one side and a high fence on the other.

“Think you’re a big man carrying that thing, don’t you?” Dudley said after a few seconds.

“What thing?”

“That — that thing you’re hiding.”

Harry grinned again.

“Not as stupid as you look, are you, Dud? But I s’pose if you were, you wouldn’t be able to walk and talk at the same time . . .”

Harry pulled out his wand. He saw Dudley look sideways at it.

“You’re not allowed,” Dudley said at once. “I know you’re not. You’d get expelled from that freak school you go to.”

“How d’you know they haven’t changed the rules, Big D?”

“They haven’t,” said Dudley, though he didn’t sound completely convinced. Harry laughed softly.

“You haven’t got the guts to take me on without that thing, have you?” Dudley snarled.

“Whereas you just need four mates behind you before you can beat up a ten-year-old. You know that boxing title you keep banging on about? How old was your opponent? Seven? Eight?”

“He was sixteen for your information,” snarled Dudley, “and he was out cold for twenty minutes after I’d finished with him and he was twice as heavy as you. You just wait till I tell Dad you had that thing out —”

“Running to Daddy now, are you? Is his ickle boxing champ frightened of nasty Harry’s wand?”

“Not this brave at night, are you?” sneered Dudley.

“This *is* night, Diddykins. That’s what we call it when it goes all dark like this.”

“I mean when you’re in bed!” Dudley snarled.

He had stopped walking. Harry stopped too, staring at his cousin. From the little he could see of Dudley’s large face, he was wearing a strangely triumphant look.

“What d’you mean, I’m not brave in bed?” said Harry, completely nonplussed. “What — am I supposed to be frightened of pillows or something?”

“I heard you last night,” said Dudley breathlessly. “Talking in your sleep. *Moaning*.”

“What d’you mean?” Harry said again, but there was a cold, plunging sensation in his stomach. He had revisited the graveyard last night in his dreams.

Dudley gave a harsh bark of laughter then adopted a high-pitched,

whimpering voice. “Don’t kill Cedric! Don’t kill Cedric!” Who’s Cedric — your boyfriend?”

“I — you’re lying —” said Harry automatically. But his mouth had gone dry. He knew Dudley wasn’t lying — how else would he know about Cedric?

“Dad! Help me, Dad! He’s going to kill me, Dad! Boo-hoo!”

“Shut up,” said Harry quietly. “Shut up, Dudley, I’m warning you!”

“Come and help me, Dad! Mum, come and help me! He’s killed Cedric! Dad, help me! He’s going to —’ *Don’t you point that thing at me!*”

Dudley backed into the alley wall. Harry was pointing the wand directly at Dudley’s heart. Harry could feel fourteen years’ hatred of Dudley pounding in his veins — what wouldn’t he give to strike now, to jinx Dudley so thoroughly he’d have to crawl home like an insect, struck dumb, sprouting feelers —

“Don’t ever talk about that again,” Harry snarled. “D’you understand me?”

“Point that thing somewhere else!”

“I said, *do you understand me?*”

“*Point it somewhere else!*”

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?”

“GET THAT THING AWAY FROM —”

Dudley gave an odd, shuddering gasp, as though he had been doused in icy water.

Something had happened to the night. The star-strewn indigo sky was suddenly pitch-black and lightless — the stars, the moon, the misty streetlamps at either end of the alley had vanished. The distant

grumble of cars and the whisper of trees had gone. The balmy evening was suddenly piercingly, biting cold. They were surrounded by total, impenetrable, silent darkness, as though some giant hand had dropped a thick, icy mantle over the entire alleyway, blinding them.

For a split second Harry thought he had done magic without meaning to, despite the fact that he'd been resisting as hard as he could — then his reason caught up with his senses — he didn't have the power to turn off the stars. He turned his head this way and that, trying to see something, but the darkness pressed on his eyes like a weightless veil.

Dudley's terrified voice broke in Harry's ear.

"W-what are you d-doing? St-stop it!"

"I'm not doing anything! Shut up and don't move!"

"I c-can't see! I've g-gone blind! I —"

"I said shut up!"

Harry stood stock-still, turning his sightless eyes left and right. The cold was so intense that he was shivering all over; goose bumps had erupted up his arms, and the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up — he opened his eyes to their fullest extent, staring blankly around, unseeing . . .

It was impossible . . . They couldn't be here . . . Not in Little Whinging . . . He strained his ears . . . He would hear them before he saw them . . .

"I'll t-tell Dad!" Dudley whimpered. "W-where are you? What are you d-do — ?"

"Will you shut up?" Harry hissed, "I'm trying to lis —"

But he fell silent. He had heard just the thing he had been dreading.

There was something in the alleyway apart from themselves, something that was drawing long, hoarse, rattling breaths. Harry felt a horrible jolt of dread as he stood trembling in the freezing air.

“C-cut it out! Stop doing it! I’ll h-hit you, I swear I will!”

“Dudley, shut —”

WHAM!

A fist made contact with the side of Harry’s head, lifting Harry off his feet. Small white lights popped in front of Harry’s eyes; for the second time in an hour he felt as though his head had been cleaved in two; next moment he had landed hard on the ground, and his wand had flown out of his hand.

“You moron, Dudley!” Harry yelled, his eyes watering with pain, as he scrambled to his hands and knees, now feeling around frantically in the blackness. He heard Dudley blundering away, hitting the alley fence, stumbling.

“DUDLEY, COME BACK! YOU’RE RUNNING RIGHT AT IT!”

There was a horrible squealing yell, and Dudley’s footsteps stopped. At the same moment, Harry felt a creeping chill behind him that could mean only one thing. There was more than one.

“DUDLEY, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT! WHATEVER YOU DO, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT! Wand!” Harry muttered frantically, his hands flying over the ground like spiders. “Where’s — wand — come on — *Lumos!*”

He said the spell automatically, desperate for light to help him in his search — and to his disbelieving relief, light flared inches from his right hand — the wand-tip had ignited. Harry snatched it up,

scrambled to his feet, and turned around.

His stomach turned over.

A towering, hooded figure was gliding smoothly toward him, hovering over the ground, no feet or face visible beneath its robes, sucking on the night as it came.

Stumbling backward, Harry raised his wand.

"Expecto Patronum!"

A silvery wisp of vapor shot from the tip of the wand and the dementor slowed, but the spell hadn't worked properly; tripping over his feet, Harry retreated farther as the dementor bore down upon him, panic fogging his brain — *concentrate* —

A pair of gray, slimy, scabbed hands slid from inside the dementor's robes, reaching for him. A rushing noise filled Harry's ears.

"Expecto Patronum!"

His voice sounded dim and distant . . . Another wisp of silver smoke, feebler than the last, drifted from the wand — he couldn't do it anymore, he couldn't work the spell —

There was laughter inside his own head, shrill, high-pitched laughter . . . He could smell the dementor's putrid, death-cold breath, filling his own lungs, drowning him — *Think . . . something happy. . .*

But there was no happiness in him . . . The dementor's icy fingers were closing on his throat — the high-pitched laughter was growing louder and louder, and a voice spoke inside his head — *"Bow to death, Harry. . . . It might even be painless . . . I would not know. . . . I have never died. . . ."*

He was never going to see Ron and Hermione again —

And their faces burst clearly into his mind as he fought for breath

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

An enormous silver stag erupted from the tip of Harry’s wand; its antlers caught the dementor in the place where the heart should have been; it was thrown backward, weightless as darkness, and as the stag charged, the dementor swooped away, batlike and defeated.

“THIS WAY!” Harry shouted at the stag. Wheeling around, he sprinted down the alleyway, holding the lit wand aloft. “DUDLEY? DUDLEY!”

He had run barely a dozen steps when he reached them. Dudley was curled on the ground, his arms clamped over his face; a second dementor was crouching low over him, gripping his wrists in its slimy hands, prizing them slowly, almost lovingly apart, lowering its hooded head toward Dudley’s face as though about to kiss him.

“GET IT!” Harry bellowed, and with a rushing, roaring sound, the silver stag he had conjured came galloping back past him. The dementor’s eyeless face was barely an inch from Dudley’s when the silver antlers caught it; the thing was thrown up into the air and, like its fellow, it soared away and was absorbed into the darkness. The stag cantered to the end of the alleyway and dissolved into silver mist.

Moon, stars, and streetlamps burst back into life. A warm breeze swept the alleyway. Trees rustled in neighboring gardens and the mundane rumble of cars in Magnolia Crescent filled the air again. Harry stood quite still, all his senses vibrating, taking in the abrupt

return to normality. After a moment he became aware that his T-shirt was sticking to him; he was drenched in sweat.

He could not believe what had just happened. Dementors *here*, in Little Whinging . . .

Dudley lay curled up on the ground, whimpering and shaking. Harry bent down to see whether he was in a fit state to stand up, but then heard loud, running footsteps behind him; instinctively raising his wand again, he spun on his heel to face the newcomer.

Mrs. Figg, their batty old neighbor, came panting into sight. Her grizzled gray hair was escaping from its hairnet, a clanking string shopping bag was swinging from her wrist, and her feet were halfway out of her tartan carpet slippers. Harry made to stow his wand hurriedly out of sight, but —

“Don’t put it away, idiot boy!” she shrieked. “What if there are more of them around? Oh, I’m going to *kill* Mundungus Fletcher!”

Titels beskikbaar in die Harry Potter-reeks
(In leesvolgorde)

Harry Potter en die Towenaar se Steen
Harry Potter en die Kamer van Geheimenisse
Harry Potter en die Gevangene van Azkaban
Harry Potter en die Beker Vol Vuur
Harry Potter en die Orde van die Feniks

HARRY POTTER

en die Orde van die Feniks



J.K. Rowling

Vertaal deur Janie Oosthuysen



Human & Rousseau
Kaapstad Pretoria Johannesburg

Aan Neil, Jessica en David wat my wêreld betower

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Geen gedeelte van hierdie boek mag sonder die skriftelike verlot
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fotokopiëring, skyf- of bandopname, of deur enige ander stelsel
van inligtingsbewaring

Dudley se verskrikking

Die warmste dag van die somer tot dusver is amper verby en 'n lommerige stilte hang oor die groot, vierkantige huise in Ligusterlaan. Motors wat gewoonlik blink, staan stowwerig in die opritte en grasperke wat voorheen smaraggroen was, is droog en geel – die gebruik van tuinslange is weens die droogte verbied. Die inwoners van Ligusterlaan wat nie nou soos altyd hul motors was en grasperke sny nie, skuil in die skaduwee van hul koel huise, hul vensters wyd oop in die hoop dat 'n briesie – wat nie bestaan nie – daardeur sal waai. Die enigste mens buite is 'n tienerseun wat plat op sy rug in 'n blombedding voor Nommer Vier lê.

Hy is 'n maer seun met swart hare en 'n bril en die gekwelde, effens ongesonde voorkoms van iemand wat te gou te vinnig gegroei het. Sy jeans is geskeur en vuil, sy T-hemp sakkerig en verbleik en sy tekkies se sole trek los van die bokante. Harry Potter se voorkoms maak hom nie bemind onder die bure nie. Hulle is die soort mense wat reken dat slordigheid 'n strafbare oortreding behoort te wees, maar aangesien hy vanaand agter 'n groot krismisroosbos wegkruip, kan geen verbyganger hom sien nie. Om die waarheid te sê, al hoe hy raak gesien kan word, is as oom Vernon of tante Petunia hul koppe deur die woonkamer se venster sou steek en reguit na die blombedding daar onder kyk.

Alles in ag genome, reken Harry hy moet gelukgewens word met sy uitstekende plan om juis hier weg te kruip. Hy is dalk nie baie gemaklik op die warm, harde grond nie, maar aan die ander kant is daar niemand wat na hom gluur, hul tande só hard kners dat hy nie die nuus kan hoor of hom met gemene vrae bestook nie, soos elke keer dat hy probeer het om in die woonkamer saam met sy oom en tante televisie te kyk.

Amper asof sy gedagte deur die oop venster gefladder het, klink oom Vernon, Harry se oom, se stem skielik op.

“Ek is bly om te sien dat die seun hom nie meer probeer opdring nie. Terloops, waar is hy?”

“Ek weet nie,” sê tant Petunia onbekommerd. “Nie in die huis nie.”

Oom Vernon snork.

“Kyk die nuus . . .” sê hy snydend. “Ek sal graag wil weet wat daár-agter steek. Watter normale seun stel in die nuus belang – Dudley het nie ’n idee wat aangaan nie; ek twyfel of hy eens weet wie die eerste minister is! In elk geval, dis nie asof daar enigiets oor sy soort op ons nuus sal wees –”

“Vernon, sjuut!” sê tant Petunia. “Die venster is oop!”

“O – ja – jammer, skat.”

Die Dursleys word stil. Harry luister na die kenwysie vir ’n nuwe vrugte-en-graan-ontbykos terwyl hy kyk hoe ou tant Freya, ’n effens betottelde kattelieshebbër wat daar naby in Wisteriastraat woon, stadig verbystap. Sy frons en mompel binnensmonds. Harry is baie verlig dat hy agter die struik versteek is, want die laaste tyd nooi tant Freya hom knaend vir tee wanneer sy hom in die straat raakloop. Sy is al om die hoek en heeltemal buite sig toe oom Vernon se stem weer deur die venster dryf.

“Eet Duddie vanaand iewers?”

“By die Polkisse,” sê tant Petunia liefderik. “Hy’t so baie maatjies, hy’s so gewild . . .”

Dis met inspanning dat Harry ’n snork onderdruk. Wat Dudley betref, is die Dursleys werklik ongelooflik onnosel. Hulle glo al sy dom leuens oor hoe hy elke aand van die somervakansie by ’n ander lid van sy bende gaan eet. Harry weet baie goed dat Dudley by niemand gaan kuier het nie; hy en sy trawante verniel saans die speel-park, rook op die straathoeke en gooi klippe na verbygaande motors en kinders. Harry sien hulle wanneer hy saans in die dorp rondstap. Die grootste gedeelte van sy vakansie loop hy deur die strate en krap in vullisdromme op soek na koerante.

Harry hoor die eerste note van die musiek wat die nuus om sewe aankondig en sy maag draai. Dalk is vannag – ná ’n maand se gewag – die nag.

“Rekordgetalle gestrande vakansiegangers oorstroom lughawens in die tweede week van die staking deur Spaanse bagasiehanteerders –”

“Gee hulle ’n lewenslange siësta. Dis wat ek sou doen,” snou oom Vernon en verdoof die laaste deel van die nuusleser se sin, maar dit maak nie saak nie: buite in die blombedding voel Harry hoe die knop op sy maag ontspan. As enigiets gebeur het, sou dit beslis die eerste item op die nuus gewees het. Dood en verwoesting is baie belangriker as gestrande vakansiegangers.

Hy slaak ’n lang, stadige sug en staar op na die helderblou hemel.

Elke dag van hierdie vakansie is dit dieselfde ding: die spanning, die verwagting, die tydelike verligting, en dan weer die spanning wat van voor af opbou . . . en die hele tyd die vraag wat al dringender word: *hoe kom het niks nog gebeur nie?*

Hy luister verder, ingeval daar 'n geringe leidraad is, iets wat die Moggels nie herken vir wat dit in werklikheid is nie – dalk 'n onverklaarbare verdwyning of 'n eienaardige ongeluk . . . maar die bagasie-hanteerders se staking word gevolg deur nuus oor die droogte in Suidoos-Engeland (“Ek hoop hy luister langsaan!” bulder oom Vernon. “Hy en sy sproeiers drie-uur soggens!”), 'n beroemde aktrise wat van haar beroemde man skei (“Asof ons in hulle smerige sake belang stel,” snuif tant Petunia, wat die saak nougeset volg in elke tydskrif waarop sy haar benerige hande kan lê).

Harry maak sy oë toe teen die aandlug wat in 'n gloed van kleure uitbars net toe die nuusleser sê: *“En laastens, Piet die Parkiet het 'n nuwe manier gevind om hierdie somer koel te bly. Piet, wat in die Five Feathers in Barnsley woon, het leer waterski! Mara Dorkins het meer gaan uitvind.”*

Harry maak sy oë oop. As hulle al by parkiete is wat waterski, gaan daar niks anders wees wat die moeite werd is nie. Hy rol versigtig op sy maag en lig hom op sy knieë en elmboë, gereed om onder die venster uit te kruip.

Hy het skaars geroer toe verskeie dinge feitlik gelyk gebeur.

'n Harde, galmende klapgeluid verbreek die slaperige stilte soos 'n geweskoot; 'n kat skiet onderdeur 'n geparkeerde motor en verdwyn buite sig; 'n kreet, 'n dawerende vloek en die geluid van porselein wat breek kom uit die Dursleys se woonkamer. Asof dit die teken is waarop Harry gewag het, spring hy orent terwyl hy 'n dun towerstaf van hout soos 'n swaard uit sy jeans se gordel pluk – maar voor hy hom tot sy volle lengte kan uitstrek, tref sy kop die Dursleys se oop venster. Die slag wat volg, laat tant Petunia nog harder skree.

Dit voel vir Harry asof sy kop in twee gekloof is. Sy oë traan en hy slinger effens terwyl hy op die straat probeer fokus om te sien waarvandaan die geraas gekom het, maar hy is skaars orent of twee groot pers hande kom deur die oop venster en sluit styf om sy nek.

“Sit – dit – weg!” sis oom Vernon in Harry se oor. “Nou! Voor – iemand – sien!”

“Los – my!” snak Harry. Hulle worstel vir 'n paar sekondes. Harry rem met sy linkerhand aan sy oom se worsvingers terwyl hy sy towerstaf styf in sy regterhand vashou. Net toe die pyn in Harry se kop besonder pynlik klop, uiter oom Vernon 'n kreet en laat Harry

los asof hy 'n elektriese skok gekry het. Dis asof die een of ander onsigbare krag deur sy nefie gevloei het wat dit vir hom onmoontlik maak om sy greep te behou.

Harry val hygend vooroor in die krismisroosbos, sukkel orent en kyk rond. Daar is nie 'n teken van wat die harde klapgeluid kon veroorsaak het nie, maar verskeie gesigte loer deur naburige vensters. Harry druk sy towerstaf vinnig terug in sy jeans en probeer onskuldig lyk.

"Lieflike aand!" skree oom Vernon en waai vir mevrou Nommer Sewe aan die oorkant wat agter haar kantgordyne uitloer. "Het julle daardie kar nou net hoor terugslaan? Ek en Petunia het groot geskrik!"

Hy bly manies grinnik totdat die nuuskierige bure voor hul vensters verdwyn. Toe word die grinnik 'n grynslag van woede toe hy Harry na hom toe wink.

Harry gee 'n paar tree nader, maar sorg dat hy net-net buite bereik van oom Vernon se uitgestrekte hande bly sodat hy nie verder gewurg kan word nie.

"Wat de *duiwel* dink jy doen jy, seun?" vra oom Vernon in 'n krakerige stem wat van woede bewe.

"Wat bedoel jy wat doen ek?" sê Harry koud. Hy kyk nog steeds op en af in die straat in die hoop dat hy die persoon sal sien wat die klapgeluid gemaak het.

"Vir wat maak jy 'n geraas soos 'n pistoolskoot hier onder ons –"

"Ek het nie daardie geluid gemaak nie," sê Harry beslis.

Tant Petunia se maer perdegestig verskyn nou langs oom Vernon se breë perse. Sy lyk briesend.

"Hoekom kruip jy onder ons venster weg?"

"Ja – ja, goeie punt, Petunia! Wat maak jy onder ons venster, seun?"

"Ek luister na die nuus," sê Harry gelate.

Sy oom en tante kyk geskok na mekaar.

"Luister na die nuus! Al weer?"

"Wel, dit verander elke dag, sien," sê Harry.

"Moet jou nie slim hou nie, seun! Ek wil weet waarmee jy regtig besig is – en moenie verder vir my hierdie *ek luister na die nuus* bog gee nie! Jy weet net so goed soos ek dat *julle spul* –"

"Saggies, Vernon," sê tant Petunia gedemp en oom Vernon laat sak sy stem sodat Harry hom skaars kan hoor, "– dat *julle spul* nie op ons nuus kom nie!"

"Dis wat julle dink," sê Harry.

Die Dursleys gluur 'n paar sekondes na hom en toe sê tant Petunia: "Jy's 'n vieslike klein leuenaar. Wat doen al daardie –" sy

laat haar stem ook sak sodat Harry die volgende woord moet lip-lees, “ – uile as hulle nie vir jou nuus bring nie?”

“Aha!” sê oom Vernon in ’n triomfantlike fluisterstem. “Hoe gaan jy jou nou loswikkel, seun? Asof ons nie weet dat jy al jou nuus van daardie verpestelike voëls kry nie!”

Harry huiwer ’n paar oomblikke. Hierdie keer is dit vir hom swaar om die waarheid te praat, hoewel sy oom en tante nie naastenby kan weet hoe moeilik dit vir hom is om dit te erken nie.

“Die uile . . . bring nie vir my nuus nie,” sê hy toonloos.

“Ek glo dit nie,” sê tant Petunia dadelik.

“Ek ook nie,” sê oom Vernon met mening.

“Ons weet jy’s met iets onderduims besig,” sê tant Petunia.

“Ons is nie toe nie, hoor,” sê oom Vernon.

“Wel, dis nuus vir my,” sê Harry, wat hom begin vererg het. Voor die Dursleys hom kan keer, swaai hy om, steek die voorste grasperk oor, tree oor die lae tuinmuur en stap met lang tree straatop.

Hy is nou in die moeilikheid en hy weet dit. Hy sal sy oom en tante later in die gesig moet kyk en die prys betaal vir sy onbeskoftheid, maar op hierdie oomblik kan dit hom nie skeel nie; daar is belangriker dinge om hom oor te bekommer.

Hy is seker die klapgeluid is gemaak deur iemand wat geappareer of gedisappareer het. Dis die presiese geluid wat Dobbi die huiself maak wanneer hy in die niet verdwyn. Is dit moontlik dat Dobbi hier in Ligusterlaan is? Is Dobbi dalk besig om hom op hierdie oomblik te volg? By dié gedagte swaai hy om en staar in Ligusterlaan af, maar dit lyk heeltemal verlate, en Harry is seker Dobbi weet nie hoe om onsigbaar te word nie.

Hy stap aan sonder dat hy mooi weet watter koers hy inslaan. Hy was die laaste tyd so baie op straat dat sy voete hom vanself na sy gunstelingplekke dra. Elke paar tree kyk hy terug oor sy skouer. Hy is seker dat iemand uit die towerwêreld naby hom was terwyl hy tussen tant Petunia se halfdood begonias gelê het. Hoekom het hulle nie met hom gepraat nie, hoekom het hulle nie kontak gemaak nie, waar is hulle nou?

Net toe die gevoel van verydeling op sy ergste is, is hy skielik ook nie meer seker nie.

Dalk was dit tog nie ’n towergeluid nie. Dalk is hy so uitgehonger vir die kleinste teken van kontak uit die wêreld waaraan hy behoort dat doodgewone geluide hom laat oorreeger. Kan hy seker wees dat hy nie bloot gehoor het hoe iets in een van die bure se huise breek nie?

Daar is ’n dowwe, sinkende gevoel in Harry se maag en voor hy

weet wat hom tref, rol die gevoel van hopeloosheid wat hom nog die hele somervakansie pla weer oor hom.

Môreoggend gaan die wekker hom om vyfuur wakker maak so dat hy die uil kan betaal wat die *Daaglikse Profeet* aflewer – maar maak dit hoegenaamd nog sin om dit te kry? Deesdae loer hy bloot na die voorblad voor hy dit eenkant toe slinger. Wanneer die idiote wat die koerant uitgee uiteindelik besef dat Woldemort terug is, sal dit voorbladnuus wees en dis al wat Harry interesseer.

As hy gelukkig is, sal daar ook uile wees wat briewe van sy beste vriende, Ron en Hermien, bring, hoewel enige verwagtinge oor briewe vol nuus lankal verpletter is.

Ons kan natuurlik nie veel oor jy-weet-wat sê nie . . . Ons mag niks belangriks sê nie ingeval ons briewe onderskep word . . . Ons is nogal baie besig, maar ek mag niks vertel nie . . . Daar gebeur allerhande goed, ons sal alles vir jou vertel wanneer ons jou sien . . .

Maar wanneer gaan hulle hom sien? Dit lyk asof niemand vreeslik gepla is met 'n spesifieke datum nie. Hermien het in sy verjaardagkaart geskryf *Ek reken ons sal jou binnekort sien*, maar hoe gou is binnekort? Harry lei af uit die vae skimpe in hul briewe dat Hermien en Ron op dieselfde plek is, waarskynlik by Ron-hulle se huis. Hy kan die gedagte nie verduur dat hulle twee saam pret het by Die Konynenes terwyl hy in Ligusterlaan gekluister is nie. Om die waarheid te sê, hy was so kwaad vir hulle, hy het die twee bokse Honeydukes-sjokolade wat hulle vir sy verjaardag gestuur het, weggegooi sonder om dit eens oop te maak. Hy was later spyt na die verlepte slaai wat tant Petunia daardie aand vir aandete opgedis het.

En waarmee is Ron en Hermien so besig? Hoekom is hy wat Harry is, nie besig nie? Het hy nie al oor en oor bewys dat hy baie meer as hulle kan hanteer nie? Het hulle vergeet wat hy gedoen het? Was dit nie hy wat na daardie begraafplaas gegaan en gesien het hoe Cedric vermoor is en toe self aan 'n grafsteen vasgemaak en ook amper vermoor is nie?

Moenie daaraan dink nie, sê Harry kwaai vir homself vir die honderdste keer hierdie somer. Dis erg genoeg dat hy die begraafplaas oor en oor in sy nagmerries besoek. Sy gedagtes hoef nie nog as hy wakker is ook daar te wees nie.

Hy loop om die hoek na Magnoliasingel. Halfpad met die singel stap hy verby die smal laan langs die motorhuis waar hy sy peetpa die eerste keer gesien het. Dit lyk of Sirius ten minste verstaan hoe Harry voel. Hoewel sy briewe net so sonder behoorlike nuus is soos Ron en Hermien s'n, bevat hulle darem waarskuwings en vertroos-

tingspleks van tartende skimpe: *Ek weet dit moet baie frustrerend vir jou wees. Moenie moeilikheid soek nie en alles sal oukei wees. Wees versigtig en moenie iets onbesonne aanvang nie.*

Wel, dink Harry terwyl hy Magnoliasingel oorsteek, by Magnoliaweg indraai en na die park stap waar dit reeds skemer is, hy het (min of meer) gemaak soos Sirius gevra het. Hy het minstens die versoeking weerstaan om sy trommel op sy besem te laai en self na Die Konynenes te vlieg. Om die waarheid te sê, hy dink hy gedra hom besonder goed as sy frustrasie en woede dat hy so lank in Ligusterlaan moet sit en in blombeddings moet wegkruip in ag geneem word. Dit alles net omdat hy hoop hy sal iets hoor wat hom 'n idee sal gee van die heer Woldemort se planne. Tog voel hy bitter dat die man wat ná twaalf jaar uit die Azkaban-towenaarstronk ontsnap het, die moord probeer pleeg het waarvoor hy in die eerste plek gevonnissen is en boonop met 'n gesteelde hippogrief gevlug het, nou vir hom vertel om nie onbesonne te wees nie.

Die park se hek is gesluit. Harry spring bo-oor en sit af oor die verdroogde gras. Die park is leeg en so ook die omringende strate. Toe hy by die swaaie kom, sak hy neer op die enigste een wat Dudley en sy vriende nie kon breek nie, slaan 'n arm om die ketting en staar bedruk na die grond. Hy sal nie weer in die Dursleys se blombedding kan wegkruip nie. Hy sal môre aan 'n nuwe manier moet dink om na die nuus te luister. Intussen is daar niks om na uit te sien behalwe nog 'n rustelose, versteurde nag nie, want selfs wanneer hy die nagmerries oor Cedric vryspring, het hy ontstellende drome oor lang donker gange wat eindig in doodlope en deure wat gesluit is. Hy vermoed dit hou verband met sy gevoel van vasgevangenskap wanneer hy wakker is. Die litteken op sy voorkop tintel dikwels ongemaklik, maar hy probeer hom nie bluf met die idee dat Ron of Hermien of Sirius nog daarin belang sal stel nie. In die verlede was die tinteling 'n waarskuwing dat Woldemort sterker word, maar nou dat Woldemort terug is, sal hulle waarskynlik bloot sê dié gereelde ongemak is te verstaan. Niks om hom oor te ontstel nie. . . ou nuus

Die onregverdigheid van dit alles wel in hom op dat hy van woede wil skree. As dit nie vir hom was nie, het niemand eens geweet Woldemort is terug nie! En sy beloning is om vir vier volle weke heeltemal afgesny van die towerwêreld in Little Whinging tussen dooie begonias te sit en luister hoe parkiete waterski! Hoe kon Dompeldorius so gou van hom vergeet het? Waarom is Ron en Hermien bymekaar sonder om hom ook te nooi? Hoe lank moet hy dit nog verduur dat Sirius hom vertel om hom te gedra en nie moei-

likheid te maak nie? Hoekom moet hy die versoeking weerstaan om vir die simpel *Daaglikse Profeet* te skryf, dat Woldemort terug is? Hierdie wilde gedagtes tol deur Harry se kop en sy ingewande trek ergerlik saam terwyl 'n bedompige fluweelnag oor hom toesak. Die enigste geluid is die lae gedreun van die verkeer op die pad anderkant die park se tralies.

Hy weet nie hoe lank hy op die swaai gesit het voor die geluid van stemme sy gedagtes onderbreek en hom laat opkyk nie. Die straatligte in die omringende lane gooi 'n mistige gloed, net sterk genoeg om die silhoeëtte van 'n groep mense wat deur die park stap, af te teken. Een van hulle sing 'n harde, kru lied. Die ander lag. Die duur resiesfietse wat hulle saamstoot, maak sagte klik-geluide.

Harry weet wie hierdie mense is. Die figuur heel voor is onmiskenbaar dié van sy neef, Dudley Dursley, op pad huis toe, vergesel van sy getroue trawante.

Dudley is so tamaai soos altyd, maar 'n jaar se stywe dieet en die ontdekking van 'n nuwe talent het sy voorkoms drasties verander. Oom Vernon vertel met groot behae aan almal wat wil luister dat Dudley onlangs die Junior Swaargewig Interskoolse Bokskampioen van Suidoos-Engeland geword het. Hierdie "edele sport", soos oom Vernon dit noem, maak Dudley selfs nog meer formidabel as wat hy op laerskool vir Harry gelyk het toe hy Dudley se eerste slaansak was. Harry is lankal nie meer vir sy neef bang nie, maar hy dink ook nie die feit dat Dudley geleer het om harder en sekuurder te slaan, is iets om te vier nie. Die kinders in die buurt is doodverskrik vir hom – selfs nog banger as vir "daardie Potter-seun" wat, so word hulle gewaarsku, 'n geharde jeugmisdadiger is wat na die Sint Brutus Veiligheidsentrum vir Ongeneeslik Kriminele Seuns gaan.

Harry staar na die donker figure wat oor die gras stap en wonder wie hulle vannag opgedons het. Kyk om, dink Harry terwyl hy na hulle kyk. *Komaan . . . kyk om . . . ek sit hier heeltemal alleen . . . kom doen iets*

As Dudley se vriende hom hier sien sit, sal hulle beslis op hom afpyl en wat sal Dudley dan doen? Hy sal nie aansien in sy makkers se oë wil verloor nie, maar hy sal doodbang wees om vir Harry uit te lok. Dit sal pret wees om Dudley se dilemma te aanskou, om hom te treiter, sy magteloosheid dop te hou. En as enige van die ander Harry sou probeer slaan, is hy gereed – hy het sy towerstaf. Laat hulle probeer. Hy sal dit geniet om sy frustrasie uit te haal op die seuns wat voorheen sy lewe hel gemaak het.

Maar hulle draai nie om nie, hulle sien hom nie, hulle is amper

by die tralies. Harry onderdruk die begeerte om agter hulle aan te skree . . . dis nie 'n goeie idee om skoor te soek nie . . . hy mag nie sy towermagte gebruik nie . . . hy kan geskors word.

Dudley se bende se stemme sterf weg, hulle is buite sig in Magnoliastraat.

Daar het jy dit, Sirius, dink Harry onvergenoeg. Niks wat onbesonne is nie. Geen moeilikheid nie. Die presiese teenoorgestelde van wat jy sou doen.

Harry staan op en rek hom uit. Tant Petunia en oom Vernon reken blykbaar die tyd wanneer Dudley by die huis opdaag, is die regte tyd om tuis te wees en dat enige tyd daarna heeltemal te laat is. Oom Vernon het gedreig om Harry in die tuinhuisie toe te sluit as hy ooit weer ná Dudley sou tuiskom. Dus onderdruk Harry 'n gaap en stap fronsend na die park se hek.

Nes Ligusterlaan is Magnoliaweg vol groot, vierkantige huise met perfek versorgde tuine en groot, vierkantige eienaars wat in groot, skoon motors ry, baie soos oom Vernon s'n. Harry verkies Little Whinging saans wanneer die gordyne voor die vensters juweelkleurige vlekke in die donker maak en daar geen gevaar is dat hy moet hoor hoe die dorpenaars afkeurend oor sy "misdadige" voorkoms brom wanneer hy verbystap nie. Hy stap vinnig, sodat Dudley se bende kort voor lank weer binne sig is. Hulle is besig om mekaar by die ingang na Magnoliasingel te groet. Harry stop en wag in die skadu van 'n groot seringboom.

"soos 'n vark geskree, hè?" sê Malcolm terwyl die res giggel.

"Lekker regterhaakhou, Groot D," sê Piers.

"Dieselfde tyd môreaand?" sê Dudley.

"By my plek. My ma-hulle gaan uit," sê Gordon.

"Sien julle dan," sê Dudley.

"Tot siens, Dud!"

"Tarra, Groot D!"

Harry wag tot die ander bendelede weg is voor hy verder stap. Toe hulle stemme vervaag het, beweeg hy om die hoek na Magnoliasingel en deur baie vinnig te stap, is hy gou binne roepafstand van Dudley wat gemaklik aanstryk en toonloos neurie.

"Haai, Groot D!"

Dudley draai om.

"O," snork hy. "Dis jy."

"En hoe lank is jy al 'Groot D'?" vra Harry.

"Hou jou snater," snou Dudley en draai weg.

"Oulike naam," sê Harry met 'n grynslag. Hy gaan stap langs sy neef. "Maar vir my sal jy altyd 'ou klein Duddietjie' wees."

“Ek het gesê HOU JOU SNATER!” sê Dudley en sy hamagtige hande bal in vuiste.

“Weet die ouens dan nie wat jou ma jou noem nie?”

“Hou jou bek.”

“Jy sê nie vir haar om haar bek te hou nie. Wat van ‘Poplap’ en ‘Duddie-lief’? Kan ek jou maar so noem?”

Dudley sê niks. Dit lyk of die inspanning om Harry nie te slaan nie al sy selfbeheersing verg.

“Vir wie het julle vannag opgedons?” vra Harry en sy glimlag verflou. “Nog ’n tienjarige? Ek weet wat julle twee aande gelede aan Mark Evans gedoen het – ”

“Hy’t dit gesoek,” snou Dudley.

“Hy het?”

“Hy was ongeskik met my.”

“Sowaar? Het hy gesê jy lyk soos ’n vark wat geleer het om op sy agterpote te loop? Want dis nie ongeskik nie, Dud, dis waar.”

’n Spiertjie spring in Dudley se kakebeen. Dis vir Harry ontset-tend lekker om te sien hoe kwaad hy vir Dudley maak; hy voel asof hy van sy eie frustrasie op sy neef oorplaas, die enigste uitlaatklep wat hy het.

Hulle draai regs langs die smal laan waar Harry die eerste keer vir Sirius gesien het en wat deel vorm van die kortpad tussen Magnolia-singel en Wisteriastraat. Dis leeg en baie donkerder as die ander strate, want daar is geen straatligte nie. Hul voetstappe word gedemp deur die motorhuismure aan een kant en ’n hoë heining aan die ander kant.

“Dink jy’s groot oor jy daai ding het, nè?” sê Dudley ná ’n paar sekondes.

“Watter ding?”

“Daardie – daardie ding wat jy wegsteek.”

Harry grinnik weer.

“Nie so dom soos jy lyk nie, hè, Dudley? Maar ek reken as jy was, sou jy nie tegelyk kon loop én praat nie.”

Harry haal sy towerstaf uit. Hy sien hoe Dudley onderlangs daarna loer.

“Jy mag nie,” sê Dudley dadelik. “Ek weet jy mag nie. Jy sal uit daai simpel skool van jou geskors word.”

“En hoe weet jy hulle het nie die reëls verander nie, Groot D?”

“Hulle het nie,” sê Dudley, maar hy klink nie heeltemal seker nie.

Harry lag saggies.

“Jy’s te bang om my aan te vat sonder daardie ding, hè?” snou Dudley.

“Terwyl jy, maar net vier ouens agter jou nodig het om ’n tienjarige op te dons. Weet jy, daardie bokstittel waarvan jy so baie praat. Hoe oud was jou teenstander? Sewe? Agt?”

“Hy was sestien, vir jou inligting,” snou Dudley, “en hy was vir twintig minute uit ná ek met hom klaar was en hy’s twee keer so swaar soos jy. Wag net tot ek vir Pa vertel dat jy daardie ding uitgehaal het –”

“Nou hardloop hy weer na Pappie toe, hè? Is sy ou bokskampioentjie dan bang vir daardie nare Harry se towerstaf?”

“Jy’s nie snags so dapper nie, hè?” snou Dudley.

“Dis nou snags, Duddietjie. Dis wat ons dit noem wanneer dit donker is soos nou.”

“Ek bedoel wanneer jy in die bed is!” grom Dudley.

Hy het gaan staan. Harry gaan ook staan en staar na sy neef. Daar is ’n vreemde, triomfantlike uitdrukking op die bietjie wat hy van Dudley se groot gesig kan sien.

“Wat bedoel jy, ek is nie dapper as ek in die bed is nie?” sê Harry verward. “Waarvoor moet ek nogal bang wees? Die kussings of wat?”

“Ek het jou laas nag gehoor,” sê Dudley vermakerig. “Jy’t in jou slaap gepraat. *Gekerm.*”

“Wat bedoel jy?” sê Harry weer, maar daar is ’n koue, sinkende gevoel in sy maag. Hy was die vorige nag in sy drome weer in die begraafplaas.

Dudley gee ’n harde blaflag en boots ’n skril kermstemmetjie na.

“Moenie vir Cedric doodmaak nie! Moenie vir Cedric doodmaak nie! Wie is Cedric – jou kêrel?”

“Ek – dit lieg jy,” sê Harry outomaties. Maar sy mond is droog. Hy weet Dudley lieg nie – hoe anders sal hy van Cedric weet?

“Pa! Help my, Pa! Hy gaan my vermoor, Pa. Boe-hoe!”

“Hou jou bek,” sê Harry saggies. “Hou jou bek, Dudley, ek waar-sku jou.”

“Kom help my, Pappie! Mammie, kom help my! Hy’t vir Cedric doodgemaak! Pa, help my! Hy gaan –” *Moenie met daardie ding na my wys nie!*

Dudley retireer tot teen die muur. Harry rig sy towerstaf vol op Dudley se hart. Hy voel hoe veertien jaar se haat vir Dudley deur sy are pols. Hy sal enigiets gee om nou toe te slaan, om Dudley só deeglik te toor dat hy soos ’n insek huis toe moet kruip, stom, met voelers wat uitgroei . . .

“Waag dit net om weer daaroor te praat,” snou Harry. “Verstaan jy my?”

“Draai weg daai ding!”

“Ek het gesê: *verstaan jy?*”

“*Draai dit weg!*”

“VERSTAAN JY MY?”

“DRAAI DAARDIE DING WEG VAN –”

Dudley gee ’n vreemde, sidderende snak asof hy in ysige water gedompel is.

Iets het met die nag gebeur. Die sterbesprinkelde indigo hemel is skielik pikswart en sonder ligte – die sterre, die maan, die mistige straatlampe aan beide kante van die laan het verdwyn. Die veraf gedreun van motors en die gefluister van bome is weg. Die soel aand is skielik snerpnd koud. Hulle is omring deur ’n totale, ondeurdringbare, geluidlose duisternis asof ’n reusehand ’n ysige mantel oor die hele laan gegooi en hulle verblind het.

Vir ’n breukdeel van ’n sekonde dink Harry dat hy getoor het sonder dat hy wou, al het hy so hard soos hy kan daarteen gestry. Dan seëvier sy gesonde verstand – hy kan nie die sterre afskakel nie. Hy draai sy kop heen en weer om te probeer sien wat aangaan, maar die duisternis rus soos ’n gewiglose sluier op sy oë.

Dudley se vreesbevange stem klink in Harry se ore.

“W-wat het jy gedoen? H-hou op!”

“Ek het niks gedoen nie! Bly stil en moenie roer nie!”

“Ek k-kan nie sien nie! Ek is b-blind! Ek –”

“Ek sê bly stil!”

Harry staan doodstil terwyl hy sy onsiende oë na links en regs draai. Die koue is so intens dat sy hele liggaam bewe; daar is hoendervleis op sy arms en bene en die hare in sy nek staan orent. Hy rek sy oë so groot oop as wat hy kan en staar om hom sonder dat hy iets sien.

Dis onmoontlik . . . hulle kan nie hiër wees nie . . . nie in Little Whinging nie . . . hy spits sy ore . . . hy sal hulle hoor voor hy hulle sien.

“Ek g-gaan vir Pa sê!” kerm Dudley. “W-waar is jy? Wat d-doen jy?”

“Maar sal jy jou snater hou?” sis Harry. “Ek probeer luister –”

Toe bly hy stil. Hy het juis dit waarvoor hy bang is, gehoor.

Daar is iets in die laan behalwe hulle twee, iets wat aaklig, skor, roggelend asemhaal: ’n Angsskok ruk deur Harry terwyl hy bewend in die ysige lug staan.

“St-top dit! Hou op om dit te doen! Ek gaan jou s-slaan, ek sweer!”

“Dudley, hou jou –”

'n Vuis tref Harry teen die kant van sy kop en lig hom van die grond af. Wit liggies spring voor sy oë rond. Vir die tweede keer in 'n uur voel dit of sy kop middeldeer gaan bars. Hy land hard op die grond en sy towerstaf vlieg uit sy hand.

"Dudley, jou moroon!" gil Harry. Sy oë traan van pyn terwyl hy op sy hande en voete orent skarrel en angstig in die donker om hom voel. Hy hoor hoe Dudley wegstrompel en in die heining vasloop.

"DUDLEY, KOM TERUG! JY HARDOOP REGUIT NA HULLE TOE!"

Daar is 'n kermende kreet en Dudley se voetstappe word stil. Terselfdertyd voel Harry 'n kruipende koue agter hom wat net een ding kan beteken: daar is meer as een.

"DUDLEY, HOU JOU MOND TOE! WAT JY OOK AL DOEN, HOU NET JOU MOND TOE! Towerstaf!" prewel Harry wanhopig terwyl sy hande soos spinnekoppe oor die grond skarrel. "Waar – is my – towerstaf – komaan – *lumos!*"

Hy sê die towerspreuk outomaties, desperaat vir lig om hom in sy soektog te help. Tot sy verligting flikker 'n liggie naby sy regterhand – die towerstaf se punt het ontbrand. Hy raap dit op, steier orent en swaai om.

Sy maag draai.

'n Lang figuur in 'n mantel sweef na hom toe. Dit hang effens bo die grond, geen voete of gesig is sigbaar onder die kleed of kap nie. Dit suig aan die naglug.

Harry strompel agteruit en lig sy towerstaf.

"*Expecto patronum!*"

'n Silwer rokie warrel uit die punt van sy towerstaf en die Dementor struikel en beweeg stadiger, maar die spreuk het nie behoorlik gewerk nie. Harry struikel en val verder terug terwyl die Dementor op hom afstuur. Sy brein is benewel van angs . . . hy moet konsentreer . . .

'n Paar grys, slymerige, skubberige hande gly onder die Dementor se kleed uit en reik na hom. 'n Ritselende geluid vul Harry se ore.

"*Expecto patronum!*"

Sy stem klink ver en dof. Nog 'n silwer rokie, dowwer as die eerste een, warrel uit sy towerstaf. Hy kan dit nie meer doen nie – hy kan nie meer die towerspreuk aktiveer nie.

Hy hoor iets lag in sy kop, 'n hoë skril gelag . . . hy kan die Dementor ruik, sy verrottende, doodskoue asem vul sy longe, oorspoel hom – hy moet dink . . . iets gelukkig . . .

Maar daar is geen geluk in hom nie. . . . die Dementor se ysige vingers sluit om sy keel. . . . die skel kekkellag word harder en harder en 'n stem praat in sy kop: "Gee jou oor aan die dood, Harry. . . . dis dalk selfs pynloos. . . . ek sal nie weet nie. . . . ek was nog nooit dood nie. . . ."

Hy sal Ron en Hermien nooit weer sien nie.

Hul gesigte verskyn skielik helder in sy gedagtes terwyl hy na asem snak.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

'n Enorme silwer takbok spring uit die punt van Harry se towerstaf; die horings vang die Dementor op die plek waar die hart behoort te wees; dit word agtertoe geslinger, gewigloos soos die duisternis, en toe die takbok nader storm, skiet die Dementor soos 'n vlermuis weg – verslaan.

"HIERDIE KANT TOE!" skree Harry vir die takbok terwyl hy omswaai en met sy verligte towerstaf in die lug deur die laan hardloop. "DUDLEY? DUDLEY!"

Hy het skaars tien tree gegee toe is hy by hulle: Dudley lê opgekrul op die grond met sy arms geklem oor sy gesig. 'n Tweede Dementor staan gebukkend oor Dudley, sy slymerige hande oor Dudley se polse terwyl hy sy arms stadig, amper liefdevol, van mekaar wegtrek. Die gesiglose kap sak af na Dudley se mond asof hy hom wil soen.

"KRY HOM!" bulder Harry en die silwer takbok wat hy getoor het, galop dawerend verby hom. Die Dementor se ooglose gesig is skaars 'n sentimeter van Dudley s'n toe die silwer horings hom tref. Die ding word in die lug geslinger en soos sy makker sweef dit weg en word opgeneem in die duisternis. Die takbok galop na die onderpunt van die laan en warrel weg in 'n silwer mis.

Die maan, sterre en straatlampe word eensklaps lewend. 'n Warm windjie waai deur die laan. Bome ritsel in die naburige tuine en die gewone gedreun van motors in Magnoliasingel vul weer die lug. Harry staan doodstil, dis asof al sy sintuie vibreer soos hy die skielike terugkeer na die gewone probeer verwerk. Hy besef na 'n rukkie dat sy T-hemp aan hom kleef. Hy is deurdrenk van die sweet.

Hy kan nie glo wat so pas gebeur het nie. Dementors, *hier*, in hulle dorp.

Dudley lê nog steeds opgekrul en kerm bewend. Harry buk oor hom om te sien of hy hoegenaamd kan opstaan, maar dan hoor hy harde voetstappe agter hom. Iemand hardloop nader. Hy lig sy towerstaf instinktief en tol om op sy hakke om die nuweling te konfronteer.

Tant Freya, hul mallerige ou buurvrou, verskyn hygend. Haar kroes grys hare het ontsnap uit haar haarnet, 'n klaterende inkopiesak van tou swaai aan haar pols en haar voete is net halfpad in haar tartanpantoffels. Harry probeer om sy towerstaf haastig weg te steek, maar —

“Moenie dit wegsit nie, onnosele seun!” gil sy. “Wat as daar nog van hulle hier rond is? O, ek gaan daardie Mundungus Fletcher vermoor!”

CHAPTER TWO



A PECK OF OWLS

What?" said Harry blankly.

"He left!" said Mrs. Figg, wringing her hands. "Left to see someone about a batch of cauldrons that fell off the back of a broom! I told him I'd flay him alive if he went, and now look! Dementors! It's just lucky I put Mr. Tibbles on the case! But we haven't got time to stand around! Hurry, now, we've got to get you back! Oh, the trouble this is going to cause! I will *kill* him!"

"But —"

The revelation that his batty old cat-obsessed neighbor knew what dementors were was almost as big a shock to Harry as meeting two

of them down the alleyway. “You’re — you’re a *witch*?”

“I’m a Squib, as Mundungus knows full well, so how on earth was I supposed to help you fight off dementors? He left you completely without cover when I *warned* him —”

“This bloke Mundungus has been following me? Hang on — it was *him*! He Disapparated from the front of my house!”

“Yes, yes, *yes*, but luckily I’d stationed Mr. Tibbles under a car just in case, and Mr. Tibbles came and warned me, but by the time I got to your house you’d gone — and now — oh, *what’s* Dumbledore going to say? You!” she shrieked at Dudley, still supine on the alley floor. “Get your fat bottom off the ground, quick!”

“You know Dumbledore?” said Harry, staring at her.

“Of course I know Dumbledore, who doesn’t know Dumbledore? But come *on* — I’ll be no help if they come back, I’ve never so much as Transfigured a teabag —”

She stooped down, seized one of Dudley’s massive arms in her wizened hands, and tugged.

“Get *up*, you useless lump, get *up*!”

But Dudley either could not or would not move. He was still on the ground, trembling and ashen-faced, his mouth shut very tight.

“I’ll do it.” Harry took hold of Dudley’s arm and heaved. With an enormous effort he managed to hoist Dudley to his feet. Dudley seemed to be on the point of fainting. His small eyes were rolling in their sockets and sweat was beading his face; the moment Harry let go of him he swayed dangerously.

“Hurry up!” said Mrs. Figg hysterically.

Harry pulled one of Dudley’s massive arms around his own

shoulders and dragged him toward the road, sagging slightly under his weight. Mrs. Figg tottered along in front of them, peering anxiously around the corner.

“Keep your wand out,” she told Harry, as they entered Wisteria Walk. “Never mind the Statute of Secrecy now, there’s going to be hell to pay anyway, we might as well be hanged for a dragon as an egg. Talk about the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery. This was *exactly* what Dumbledore was afraid of — what’s that at the end of the street? Oh, it’s just Mr. Prentice. . . . Don’t put your wand away, boy, don’t I keep telling you I’m no use?”

It was not easy to hold a wand steady and carry Dudley along at the same time. Harry gave his cousin an impatient dig in the ribs, but Dudley seemed to have lost all desire for independent movement. He was slumped on Harry’s shoulder, his large feet dragging along the ground.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’re a Squib?” Harry asked Mrs. Figg, panting with the effort to keep walking. “All those times I came round your house — why didn’t you say anything?”

“Dumbledore’s orders. I was to keep an eye on you but not say anything, you were too young. I’m sorry I gave you such a miserable time, but the Dursleys would never have let you come if they’d thought you enjoyed it. It wasn’t easy, you know. . . . But oh my word,” she said tragically, wringing her hands once more, “when Dumbledore hears about this — how could Mundungus have left, he was supposed to be on duty until midnight — *where is he?* How am I going to tell Dumbledore what’s happened, I can’t Apparate —”

“I’ve got an owl, you can borrow her,” Harry groaned, wondering

whether his spine was going to snap under Dudley's weight.

"Harry, you don't understand! Dumbledore will need to act as quickly as possible, the Ministry have their own ways of detecting underage magic, they'll know already, you mark my words —"

"But I was getting rid of dementors, I had to use magic — they're going to be more worried what dementors were doing floating around Wisteria Walk, surely?"

"Oh my dear, I wish it were so but I'm afraid — MUNDUNGUS FLETCHER, I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!"

There was a loud *crack* and a strong smell of mingled drink and stale tobacco filled the air as a squat, unshaven man in a tattered overcoat materialized right in front of them. He had short bandy legs, long straggly ginger hair, and bloodshot baggy eyes that gave him the doleful look of a basset hound; he was also clutching a silvery bundle that Harry recognized at once as an Invisibility Cloak.

"S' up, Figg?" he said, staring from Mrs. Figg to Harry and Dudley. "What 'appened to staying undercover?"

"I'll give you undercover!" cried Mrs. Figg. "*Dementors*, you useless, skiving sneak thief!"

"Dementors?" repeated Mundungus, aghast. "Dementors here?"

"Yes, here, you worthless pile of bat droppings, here!" shrieked Mrs. Figg. "Dementors attacking the boy on your watch!"

"Blimey," said Mundungus weakly, looking from Mrs. Figg to Harry and back again. "Blimey, I . . ."

"And you off buying stolen cauldrons! Didn't I tell you not to go? *Didn't I?*"

"I — well, I —" Mundungus looked deeply uncomfortable. "It

it was a very good business opportunity, see . . .”

Mrs. Figg raised the arm from which her string bag dangled and whacked Mundungus around the face and neck with it, judging by the clanking noise it made it was full of cat food.

“Ouch — gerroff — gerroff, you mad old bat! Someone’s gotta tell Dumbledore!”

“Yes — they — have!” yelled Mrs. Figg, still swinging the bag of cat food at every bit of Mundungus she could reach. “And — it — had — better — be — you — and — you — can — tell — him — why — you — weren’t — there — to — help!”

“Keep your ’airnet on!” said Mundungus, his arms over his head, cowering. “I’m going, I’m going!”

And with another loud *crack*, he vanished.

“I hope Dumbledore *murders* him!” said Mrs. Figg furiously. “Now come *on*, Harry, what are you waiting for?”

Harry decided not to waste his remaining breath on pointing out that he could barely walk under Dudley’s bulk. He gave the semiconscious Dudley a heave and staggered onward.

“I’ll take you to the door,” said Mrs. Figg, as they turned into Privet Drive. “Just in case there are more of them around. . . . Oh my word, what a catastrophe . . . and you had to fight them off yourself . . . and Dumbledore said we were to keep you from doing magic at all costs. . . . Well, it’s no good crying over spilled potion, I suppose . . . but the cat’s among the pixies now . . .”

“So,” Harry panted, “Dumbledore’s . . . been having . . . me followed?”

“Of course he has,” said Mrs. Figg impatiently. “Did you expect

him to let you wander around on your own after what happened in June? Good Lord, boy, they told me you were intelligent. Right . . . get inside and stay there,” she said as they reached number four. “I expect someone will be in touch with you soon enough.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Harry quickly.

“I’m going straight home,” said Mrs. Figg, staring around the dark street and shuddering. “I’ll need to wait for more instructions. Just stay in the house. Good night.”

“Hang on, don’t go yet! I want to know —”

But Mrs. Figg had already set off at a trot, carpet slippers flopping, string bag clanking.

“Wait!” Harry shouted after her; he had a million questions to ask anyone who was in contact with Dumbledore; but within seconds Mrs. Figg was swallowed by the darkness. Scowling, Harry readjusted Dudley on his shoulder and made his slow, painful way up number four’s garden path.

The hall light was on. Harry stuck his wand back inside the waistband of his jeans, rang the bell, and watched Aunt Petunia’s outline grow larger and larger, oddly distorted by the rippling glass in the front door.

“Diddy! About time too, I was getting quite — quite — *Diddy, what’s the matter?*”

Harry looked sideways at Dudley and ducked out from under his arm just in time. Dudley swayed for a moment on the spot, his face pale green, then he opened his mouth at last and vomited all over the doormat.

“DIDDY! Diddy, what’s the matter with you? Vernon? VERNON!”

Harry's uncle came galumphing out of the living room, walrus mustache blowing hither and thither as it always did when he was agitated. He hurried forward to help Aunt Petunia negotiate a weak-kneed Dudley over the threshold while avoiding stepping in the pool of sick.

"He's ill, Vernon!"

"What is it, son? What's happened? Did Mrs. Polkiss give you something foreign for tea?"

"Why are you all covered in dirt, darling? Have you been lying on the ground?"

"Hang on — you haven't been mugged, have you, son?"

Aunt Petunia screamed.

"Phone the police, Vernon! Phone the police! Diddy, darling, speak to Mummy! What did they do to you?"

In all the kerfuffle, nobody seemed to have noticed Harry, which suited him perfectly. He managed to slip inside just before Uncle Vernon slammed the door and while the Dursleys made their noisy progress down the hall toward the kitchen, Harry moved carefully and quietly toward the stairs.

"Who did it, son? Give us names. We'll get them, don't worry."

"Shh! He's trying to say something, Vernon! What is it, Diddy? Tell Mummy!"

Harry's foot was on the bottommost stair when Dudley found his voice.

"*Him.*"

Harry froze, foot on the stair, face screwed up, braced for the explosion.

“BOY! COME HERE!”

With a feeling of mingled dread and anger, Harry removed his foot slowly from the stair and turned to follow the Dursleys.

The scrupulously clean kitchen had an oddly unreal glitter after the darkness outside. Aunt Petunia was ushering Dudley into a chair; he was still very green and clammy looking. Uncle Vernon was standing in front of the draining board, glaring at Harry through tiny, narrowed eyes.

“What have you done to my son?” he said in a menacing growl.

“Nothing,” said Harry, knowing perfectly well that Uncle Vernon wouldn’t believe him.

“What did he do to you, Diddy?” Aunt Petunia said in a quavering voice, now sponging sick from the front of Dudley’s leather jacket. “Was it — was it you-know-what, darling? Did he use — his *thing*?”

Slowly, tremulously, Dudley nodded.

“I didn’t!” Harry said sharply, as Aunt Petunia let out a wail and Uncle Vernon raised his fists. “I didn’t do anything to him, it wasn’t me, it was —”

But at that precise moment a screech owl swooped in through the kitchen window. Narrowly missing the top of Uncle Vernon’s head, it soared across the kitchen, dropped the large parchment envelope it was carrying in its beak at Harry’s feet, and turned gracefully, the tips of its wings just brushing the top of the fridge, then zoomed outside again and off across the garden.

“OWLS!” bellowed Uncle Vernon, the well-worn vein in his temple pulsing angrily as he slammed the kitchen window shut. “OWLS AGAIN! I WILL NOT HAVE ANY MORE OWLS IN MY

HOUSE!"

But Harry was already ripping open the envelope and pulling out the letter inside, his heart pounding somewhere in the region of his Adam's apple.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that you performed the Patronus Charm at twenty-three minutes past nine this evening in a Muggle-inhabited area and in the presence of a Muggle.

The severity of this breach of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery has resulted in your expulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand.

As you have already received an official warning for a previous offense under section 13 of the International Confederation of Wizards' Statute of Secrecy, we regret to inform you that your presence is required at a disciplinary hearing at the Ministry of Magic at 9 A.M. on August 12th.

Hoping you are well,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Mafalda Hopkirk', written in dark ink.

IMPROPER USE OF MAGIC OFFICE

Ministry of Magic

Harry read the letter through twice. He was only vaguely aware of

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia talking in the vicinity. Inside his head, all was icy and numb. One fact had penetrated his consciousness like a paralyzing dart. He was expelled from Hogwarts. It was all over. He was never going back.

He looked up at the Dursleys. Uncle Vernon was purple-faced, shouting, his fists still raised; Aunt Petunia had her arms around Dudley, who was retching again.

Harry's temporarily stupefied brain seemed to reawaken. *Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand.* There was only one thing for it. He would have to run — now. Where he was going to go, Harry didn't know, but he was certain of one thing: At Hogwarts or outside it, he needed his wand. In an almost dreamlike state, he pulled his wand out and turned to leave the kitchen.

"Where d'you think you're going?" yelled Uncle Vernon. When Harry didn't reply, he pounded across the kitchen to block the doorway into the hall. "I haven't finished with you, boy!"

"Get out of the way," said Harry quietly.

"You're going to stay here and explain how my son —"

"If you don't get out of the way I'm going to jinx you," said Harry, raising the wand.

"You can't pull that one on me!" snarled Uncle Vernon. "I know you're not allowed to use it outside that madhouse you call a school!"

"The madhouse has chucked me out," said Harry. "So I can do whatever I like. You've got three seconds. One — two —"

A resounding *CRACK* filled the kitchen. Aunt Petunia screamed,

Uncle Vernon yelled and ducked, but for the third time that night Harry was staring for the source of a disturbance he had not made. He spotted it at once: A dazed and ruffled-looking barn owl was sitting outside on the kitchen sill, having just collided with the closed window.

Ignoring Uncle Vernon's anguished yell of "OWLS!" Harry crossed the room at a run and wrenched the window open again. The owl stuck out its leg, to which a small roll of parchment was tied, shook its feathers, and took off the moment Harry had pulled off the letter. Hands shaking, Harry unfurled the second message, which was written very hastily and blotchily in black ink.

Harry —

Dumbledore's just arrived at the Ministry, and he's trying to sort it all out. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR AUNT AND UNCLE'S HOUSE. DO NOT DO ANY MORE MAGIC. DO NOT SURRENDER YOUR WAND.

Arthur Weasley

Dumbledore was trying to sort it all out. . . . What did that mean? How much power did Dumbledore have to override the Ministry of Magic? Was there a chance that he might be allowed back to Hogwarts, then? A small shoot of hope burgeoned in Harry's chest, almost immediately strangled by panic — how was he supposed to refuse to surrender his wand without doing magic? He'd have to duel with the Ministry representatives, and if he did that, he'd be lucky to escape Azkaban, let alone expulsion.

His mind was racing. . . . He could run for it and risk being captured by the Ministry, or stay put and wait for them to find him here. He was much more tempted by the former course, but he knew that Mr. Weasley had his best interests at heart . . . and, after all, Dumbledore had sorted out much worse than this before.

“Right,” Harry said, “I’ve changed my mind, I’m staying.”

He flung himself down at the kitchen table and faced Dudley and Aunt Petunia. The Dursleys appeared taken aback at his abrupt change of mind. Aunt Petunia glanced despairingly at Uncle Vernon. The vein in Uncle Vernon’s purple temple was throbbing worse than ever.

“Who are all these ruddy owls from?” he growled.

“The first one was from the Ministry of Magic, expelling me,” said Harry calmly; he was straining his ears to catch noises outside in case the Ministry representatives were approaching, and it was easier and quieter to answer Uncle Vernon’s questions than to have him start raging and bellowing. “The second one was from my friend Ron’s dad, he works at the Ministry.”

“*Ministry of Magic?*” bellowed Uncle Vernon. “People like you in *government*? Oh this explains everything, everything, no wonder the country’s going to the dogs . . .”

When Harry did not respond, Uncle Vernon glared at him, then spat, “And why have you been expelled?”

“Because I did magic.”

“AHA!” roared Uncle Vernon, slamming his fist down on the top of the fridge, which sprang open; several of Dudley’s low-fat snacks toppled out and burst on the floor. “So you admit it! *What did you do*

to Dudley?"

"Nothing," said Harry, slightly less calmly. "That wasn't me —"

"Was," muttered Dudley unexpectedly, and Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia instantly made flapping gestures at Harry to quiet him while they both bent low over Dudley.

"Go on, son," said Uncle Vernon, "what did he do?"

"Tell us, darling," whispered Aunt Petunia.

"Pointed his wand at me," Dudley mumbled.

"Yeah, I did, but I didn't use —" Harry began angrily, but . . .

"SHUT UP!" roared Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia in unison. "Go on, son," repeated Uncle Vernon, mustache blowing about furiously.

"All dark," Dudley said hoarsely, shuddering. "Everything dark. And then I h-heard . . . *things*. Inside m-my head . . ."

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia exchanged looks of utter horror. If their least favorite thing in the world was magic, closely followed by neighbors who cheated more than they did on the hosepipe ban, people who heard voices were definitely in the bottom ten. They obviously thought Dudley was losing his mind.

"What sort of things did you hear, popkin?" breathed Aunt Petunia, very white-faced and with tears in her eyes.

But Dudley seemed incapable of saying. He shuddered again and shook his large blond head, and despite the sense of numb dread that had settled on Harry since the arrival of the first owl, he felt a certain curiosity. Dementors caused a person to relive the worst moments of their life. . . . What would spoiled, pampered, bullying Dudley have been forced to hear?

"How come you fell over, son?" said Uncle Vernon in an

unnaturally quiet voice, the kind of voice he would adopt at the bedside of a very ill person.

"T-tripped," said Dudley shakily. "And then —"

He gestured at his massive chest. Harry understood: Dudley was remembering the clammy cold that filled the lungs as hope and happiness were sucked out of you.

"Horrible," croaked Dudley. "Cold. Really cold."

"Okay," said Uncle Vernon in a voice of forced calm, while Aunt Petunia laid an anxious hand on Dudley's forehead to feel his temperature. "What happened then, Dudders?"

"Felt . . . felt . . . felt . . . as if . . . as if . . ."

"As if you'd never be happy again," Harry supplied tonelessly.

"Yes," Dudley whispered, still trembling.

"So," said Uncle Vernon, voice restored to full and considerable volume as he straightened up. "So you put some crackpot spell on my son so he'd hear voices and believe he was — was doomed to misery, or something, did you?"

"How many times do I have to tell you?" said Harry, temper and voice rising together. "*It wasn't me!* It was a couple of dementors!"

"A couple of — what's this codswallop?"

"De — men — tors," said Harry slowly and clearly. "Two of them."

"And what the ruddy hell are dementors?"

"They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban," said Aunt Petunia.

Two seconds' ringing silence followed these words and then Aunt Petunia clapped her hand over her mouth as though she had let slip a

disgusting swear word. Uncle Vernon was goggling at her. Harry's brain reeled. Mrs. Figg was one thing — but *Aunt Petunia*?

“How d’you know that?” he asked her, astonished.

Aunt Petunia looked quite appalled with herself. She glanced at Uncle Vernon in fearful apology, then lowered her hand slightly to reveal her horsey teeth.

“I heard — that awful boy — telling *her* about them — years ago,” she said jerkily.

“If you mean my mum and dad, why don’t you use their names?” said Harry loudly, but Aunt Petunia ignored him. She seemed horribly flustered.

Harry was stunned. Except for one outburst years ago, in the course of which Aunt Petunia had screamed that Harry’s mother had been a freak, he had never heard her mention her sister. He was astounded that she had remembered this scrap of information about the magical world for so long, when she usually put all her energies into pretending it didn’t exist.

Uncle Vernon opened his mouth, closed it again, opened it once more, shut it, then, apparently struggling to remember how to talk, opened it for a third time and croaked, “So — so — they — er — they — er — they actually exist, do they — er — dementy-whatsits?”

Aunt Petunia nodded.

Uncle Vernon looked from Aunt Petunia to Dudley to Harry as if hoping somebody was going to shout “April Fool!” When nobody did, he opened his mouth yet again, but was spared the struggle to find more words by the arrival of the third owl of the evening, which zoomed through the still-open window like a feathery cannonball and

landed with a clatter on the kitchen table, causing all three of the Dursleys to jump with fright. Harry tore a second official-looking envelope from the owl's beak and ripped it open as the owl swooped back out into the night.

"Enough — effing — *owls* . . ." muttered Uncle Vernon distractedly, stomping over to the window and slamming it shut again.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Further to our letter of approximately twenty-two minutes ago, the Ministry of Magic has revised its decision to destroy your wand forthwith. You may retain your wand until your disciplinary hearing on 12th August, at which time an official decision will be taken.

Following discussions with the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Ministry has agreed that the question of your expulsion will also be decided at that time. You should therefore consider yourself suspended from school pending further inquiries.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Magalida Rophink'.

IMPROPER USE OF MAGIC OFFICE

Ministry of Magic

Harry read this letter through three times in quick succession. The

miserable knot in his chest loosened slightly at the thought that he was not definitely expelled, though his fears were by no means banished. Everything seemed to hang on this hearing on the twelfth of August.

“Well?” said Uncle Vernon, recalling Harry to his surroundings. “What now? Have they sentenced you to anything? Do your lot have the death penalty?” he added as a hopeful afterthought.

“I’ve got to go to a hearing,” said Harry.

“And they’ll sentence you there?”

“I suppose so.”

“I won’t give up hope, then,” said Uncle Vernon nastily.

“Well, if that’s all,” said Harry, getting to his feet. He was desperate to be alone, to think, perhaps to send a letter to Ron, Hermione, or Sirius.

“NO, IT RUDDY WELL IS NOT ALL!” bellowed Uncle Vernon. “SIT BACK DOWN!”

“What *now*?” said Harry impatiently.

“DUDLEY!” roared Uncle Vernon. “I want to know exactly what happened to my son!”

“FINE!” yelled Harry, and in his temper, red and gold sparks shot out of the end of his wand, still clutched in his hand. All three Dursleys flinched, looking terrified.

“Dudley and I were in the alleyway between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk,” said Harry, speaking fast, fighting to control his temper. “Dudley thought he’d be smart with me, I pulled out my wand but didn’t use it. Then two dementors turned up —”

“But what ARE dementoids?” asked Uncle Vernon furiously.

“What do they DO?”

“I told you — they suck all the happiness out of you,” said Harry, “and if they get the chance, they kiss you —”

“Kiss you?” said Uncle Vernon, his eyes popping slightly. “Kiss you?”

“It’s what they call it when they suck the soul out of your mouth.”

Aunt Petunia uttered a soft scream.

“His *soul*? They didn’t take — he’s still got his —”

She seized Dudley by the shoulders and shook him, as though testing to see whether she could hear his soul rattling around inside him.

“Of course they didn’t get his soul, you’d know if they had,” said Harry, exasperated.

“Fought ’em off, did you, son?” said Uncle Vernon loudly, with the appearance of a man struggling to bring the conversation back onto a plane he understood. “Gave ’em the old one-two, did you?”

“You can’t give a dementor *the old one-two*,” said Harry through clenched teeth.

“Why’s he all right, then?” blustered Uncle Vernon. “Why isn’t he all empty, then?”

“Because I used the Patronus —”

WHOOSH. With a clattering, a whirring of wings, and a soft fall of dust, a fourth owl came shooting out of the kitchen fireplace.

“FOR GOD’S SAKE!” roared Uncle Vernon, pulling great clumps of hair out of his mustache, something he hadn’t been driven to in a long time. “I WILL NOT HAVE OWLS HERE, I WILL NOT TOLERATE THIS, I TELL YOU!”

But Harry was already pulling a roll of parchment from the owl's leg. He was so convinced that this letter had to be from Dumbledore, explaining everything — the dementors, Mrs. Figg, what the Ministry was up to, how he, Dumbledore, intended to sort everything out — that for the first time in his life he was disappointed to see Sirius's handwriting. Ignoring Uncle Vernon's ongoing rant about owls and narrowing his eyes against a second cloud of dust as the most recent owl took off back up the chimney, Harry read Sirius's message.

Arthur's just told us what happened.

Don't leave the house again, whatever you do.

Harry found this such an inadequate response to everything that had happened tonight that he turned the piece of parchment over, looking for the rest of the letter, but there was nothing there.

And now his temper was rising again. Wasn't *anybody* going to say "well done" for fighting off two dementors single-handedly? Both Mr. Weasley and Sirius were acting as though he'd misbehaved and they were saving their tellings-off until they could ascertain how much damage had been done.

"— a peck, I mean, pack of owls shooting in and out of my house and I won't have it, boy, I won't —"

"I can't stop the owls coming," Harry snapped, crushing Sirius's letter in his fist.

"I want the truth about what happened tonight!" barked Uncle Vernon. "If it was demenders who hurt Dudley, how come you've been expelled? You did you-know-what, you've admitted it!"

Harry took a deep, steadying breath. His head was beginning to ache again. He wanted more than anything to get out of the kitchen, away from the Dursleys.

"I did the Patronus Charm to get rid of the dementors," he said, forcing himself to remain calm. "It's the only thing that works against them."

"But what were dementoids *doing* in Little Whinging?" said Uncle Vernon in tones of outrage.

"Couldn't tell you," said Harry wearily. "No idea."

His head was pounding in the glare of the strip lighting now. His anger was ebbing away. He felt drained, exhausted. The Dursleys were all staring at him.

"It's you," said Uncle Vernon forcefully. "It's got something to do with you, boy, I know it. Why else would they turn up here? Why else would they be down that alleyway? You've got to be the only — the only —" Evidently he couldn't bring himself to say the word "wizard." "The only *you-know-what* for miles."

"I don't know why they were here . . ."

But at these words of Uncle Vernon's, Harry's exhausted brain ground back into action. Why *had* the dementors come to Little Whinging? How *could* it be coincidence that they had arrived in the alleyway where Harry was? Had they been sent? Had the Ministry of Magic lost control of the dementors, had they deserted Azkaban and joined Voldemort, as Dumbledore had predicted they would?

"These demembers guard some weirdos' prison?" said Uncle Vernon, lumbering in the wake of Harry's train of thought.

"Yes," said Harry.

If only his head would stop hurting, if only he could just leave the kitchen and get to his dark bedroom and *think*. . . .

“Oho! They were coming to arrest you!” said Uncle Vernon, with the triumphant air of a man reaching an unassailable conclusion. “That’s it, isn’t it, boy? You’re on the run from the law!”

“Of course I’m not,” said Harry, shaking his head as though to scare off a fly, his mind racing now.

“Then why — ?”

“He must have sent them,” said Harry quietly, more to himself than to Uncle Vernon.

“What’s that? Who must have sent them?”

“Lord Voldemort,” said Harry.

He registered dimly how strange it was that the Dursleys, who flinched, winced, and squawked if they heard words like “wizard,” “magic,” or “wand,” could hear the name of the most evil wizard of all time without the slightest tremor.

“Lord — hang on,” said Uncle Vernon, his face screwed up, a look of dawning comprehension in his piggy eyes. “I’ve heard that name . . . that was the one who . . .”

“Murdered my parents, yes,” Harry said.

“But he’s gone,” said Uncle Vernon impatiently, without the slightest sign that the murder of Harry’s parents might be a painful topic to anybody. “That giant bloke said so. He’s gone.”

“He’s back,” said Harry heavily.

It felt very strange to be standing here in Aunt Petunia’s surgically clean kitchen, beside the top-of-the-range fridge and the wide-screen television, and talking calmly of Lord Voldemort to Uncle Vernon.

The arrival of the dementors in Little Whinging seemed to have caused a breach in the great, invisible wall that divided the relentlessly non-magical world of Privet Drive and the world beyond. Harry's two lives had somehow become fused and everything had been turned upside down: The Dursleys were asking for details about the magical world and Mrs. Figg knew Albus Dumbledore; dementors were soaring around Little Whinging and he might never go back to Hogwarts. Harry's head throbbed more painfully.

"Back?" whispered Aunt Petunia.

She was looking at Harry as she had never looked at him before. And all of a sudden, for the very first time in his life, Harry fully appreciated that Aunt Petunia was his mother's sister. He could not have said why this hit him so very powerfully at this moment. All he knew was that he was not the only person in the room who had an inkling of what Lord Voldemort being back might mean. Aunt Petunia had never in her life looked at him like that before. Her large, pale eyes (so unlike her sister's) were not narrowed in dislike or anger. They were wide and fearful. The furious pretense that Aunt Petunia had maintained all Harry's life — that there was no magic and no world other than the world she inhabited with Uncle Vernon — seemed to have fallen away.

"Yes," Harry said, talking directly to Aunt Petunia now. "He came back a month ago. I saw him."

Her hands found Dudley's massive leather-clad shoulders and clutched them.

"Hang on," said Uncle Vernon, looking from his wife to Harry and

back again, apparently dazed and confused by the unprecedented understanding that seemed to have sprung up between them. "Hang on. This Lord Voldything's back, you say."

"Yes."

"The one who murdered your parents."

"Yes."

"And now he's sending dismembers after you?"

"Looks like it," said Harry.

"I see," said Uncle Vernon, looking from his white-faced wife to Harry and hitching up his trousers. He seemed to be swelling, his great purple face stretching before Harry's eyes. "Well, that settles it," he said, his shirt front straining as he inflated himself, "*you can get out of this house, boy!*"

"What?" said Harry.

"You heard me — OUT!" Uncle Vernon bellowed, and even Aunt Petunia and Dudley jumped. "OUT! OUT! I should've done it years ago! Owls treating the place like a rest home, puddings exploding, half the lounge destroyed, Dudley's tail, Marge bobbing around on the ceiling, and that flying Ford Anglia — OUT! OUT! You've had it! You're history! You're not staying here if some loony's after you, you're not endangering my wife and son, you're not bringing trouble down on us, if you're going the same way as your useless parents, I've had it! OUT!"

Harry stood rooted to the spot. The letters from the Ministry, Mr. Weasley, and Sirius were crushed in his left hand. *Don't leave the house again, whatever you do. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR AUNT AND UNCLE'S HOUSE.*

“You heard me!” said Uncle Vernon, bending forward now, so that his massive purple face came closer to Harry’s, so that Harry actually felt flecks of spit hit his face. “Get going! You were all keen to leave half an hour ago! I’m right behind you! Get out and never darken our doorstep again! Why we ever kept you in the first place I don’t know. Marge was right, it should have been the orphanage, we were too damn soft for our own good, thought we could squash it out of you, thought we could turn you normal, but you’ve been rotten from the beginning, and I’ve had enough — OWLS!”

The fifth owl zoomed down the chimney so fast it actually hit the floor before zooming into the air again with a loud screech. Harry raised his hand to seize the letter, which was in a scarlet envelope, but it soared straight over his head, flying directly at Aunt Petunia, who let out a scream and ducked, her arms over her face. The owl dropped the red envelope on her head, turned, and flew straight up the chimney again.

Harry darted forward to pick up the letter, but Aunt Petunia beat him to it.

“You can open it if you like,” said Harry, “but I’ll hear what it says anyway. That’s a Howler.”

“Let go of it, Petunia!” roared Uncle Vernon. “Don’t touch it, it could be dangerous!”

“It’s addressed to me,” said Aunt Petunia in a shaking voice. “It’s addressed to *me*, Vernon, look! *Mrs. Petunia Dursley, The Kitchen, Number Four, Privet Drive —*”

She caught her breath, horrified. The red envelope had begun to smoke.

“Open it!” Harry urged her. “Get it over with! It’ll happen anyway.”

“No —”

Aunt Petunia’s hand was trembling. She looked wildly around the kitchen as though looking for an escape route, but too late — the envelope burst into flames. Aunt Petunia screamed and dropped it.

An awful voice filled the kitchen, echoing in the confined space, issuing from the burning letter on the table.

“REMEMBER MY LAST, PETUNIA.”

Aunt Petunia looked as though she might faint. She sank into the chair beside Dudley, her face in her hands. The remains of the envelope smoldered into ash in the silence.

“What is this?” Uncle Vernon said hoarsely. “What — I don’t — Petunia?”

Aunt Petunia said nothing. Dudley was staring stupidly at his mother, his mouth hanging open. The silence spiraled horribly. Harry was watching his aunt, utterly bewildered, his head throbbing fit to burst.

“Petunia, dear?” said Uncle Vernon timidly. “P-Petunia?”

She raised her head. She was still trembling. She swallowed.

“The boy — the boy will have to stay, Vernon,” she said weakly.

“W-what?”

“He stays,” she said. She was not looking at Harry. She got to her feet again.

“He . . . but Petunia . . .”

“If we throw him out, the neighbors will talk,” she said. She was regaining her usual brisk, snappish manner rapidly, though she was still very pale. “They’ll ask awkward questions, they’ll want to know where he’s gone. We’ll have to keep him.”

Uncle Vernon was deflating like an old tire.

“But Petunia, dear —”

Aunt Petunia ignored him. She turned to Harry.

“You’re to stay in your room,” she said. “You’re not to leave the house. Now get to bed.”

Harry didn’t move.

“Who was that Howler from?”

“Don’t ask questions,” Aunt Petunia snapped.

“Are you in touch with wizards?”

“I told you to get to bed!”

“What did it mean? Remember the last what?”

“Go to bed!”

“How come — ?”

“YOU HEARD YOUR AUNT, NOW GET TO BED!”

Uilepos

“Wat?” sê Harry beteuterd.

“Hy’s weg!” sê tant Freya handewringend. “Weg om iemand te gaan sien oor ’n vrag hekseketels wat agter van ’n besem afgeval het! Ek’t vir hom gesê ek sal hom doodslaen as hy gaan, en kyk nou! Dementors! Dis ’n geluk dat ek meneer Tibbie op die saak gesit het! Maar daar’s nie tyd vir ginnegaap nie. Maak gou, ons moet jou terugkry! O, die moeilikheid wat dit gaan veroorsaak! Ek gaan hom vermoor!”

“Maar – ” Die onthulling dat sy getikte, katversotte ou buurvrou weet wat Dementors is, is vir Harry amper net so ’n groot skok as om twee van hulle in die laan te ontmoet. “U – u is ’n heks?”

“Ek’s ’n Sisser, soos Mundungus baie goed weet. Hoe op aarde kon ek jou help om teen Dementors te veg? Hy’t jou heeltemal onbeskermd gelaat terwyl ek vir hom gesê het – ”

“Hierdie Mundungus het my gevolg? Wag ’n bietjie – dit was hy! Hy’t voor ons huis gedisappareer!”

“Ja, ja, ja, maar gelukkig het ek vir meneer Tibbie onder ’n motor laat wagstaan, net ingeval, en meneer Tibbie het my kom waarsku, maar toe ek by jou huis kom, was jy weg – en nou – o, wat gaan Dompeldorius sê? Jy!” skree sy vir Dudley wat nog steeds op die naat van sy rug op die grond lê. “Lig jou vet agterstewe! Maak gou!”

“Tannie ken vir Dompeldorius?” sê Harry en staar na haar.

“Maar natuurlik ken ek vir Dompeldorius, wie ken nie vir Dompeldorius nie? Maar komaan – ek sal van geen hulp wees as hulle terugkom nie, ek het nog nooit eens ’n teesakkie getransfigureer nie.”

Sy buk vooroor, gryp een van Dudley se massiewe arms in haar verrimpelde hande en trek.

“Staan op, jou nikswerd lummel, staan op!”

Maar Dudley kan of wil nie beweeg nie. Hy bly lê bewend op die grond, vaal in die gesig en met sy mond baie styf toe.

“Laat ek probeer.” Harry vat Dudley se arm vas en trek. Met ’n

geweldigse poging kry hy hom orent. Dit lyk of Dudley enige oomblik gaan flou word. Sy klein ogies rol in hul kasse en sweet pèrel op sy gesig. Die oomblik toe Harry hom laat los, slinger hy gevaarlik.

“Maak gou!” sê tant Freya histories.

Harry slaan een van Dudley se tamaai arms om sy skouers en sleepdra hom na die bopunt van die laan. Hy lê effens skeef onder die gewig. Tant Freya trippel vooruit en loer benoud om die hoek.

“Hou jou towerstaf gereed,” sê sy vir Harry toe hulle by Wisteriastraat indraai. “Moet jou nie nou oor die Statuut van Geheimhouding bekommer nie, daar gaan in elk geval genoeg moeilikheid wees, ons kan net sowel vir ’n draak as vir ’n eier gehang word. Gepraat van die Redelike Beperking op Towy deur Minderjariges – dis *presies* waarvoor Dompeldorius bang was – Wat’s dit daar aan die onderpunt van die straat? O, dis net meneer Prentis. . . . Moenie jou towerstaf wegsit nie, seun, het ek nie vir jou gesê dat ek niks beteken nie?”

Dis nie maklik om ’n towerstaf gereed te hou en terselfdertyd vir Dudley te sleepdra nie. Harry pomp sy neef ongeduldig in die ribbes, maar dit lyk of Dudley alle drif vir onafhanklike beweging verloor het. Hy hang aan Harry se skouer en sy groot voete sleep oor die grond.

“Hoekom het tannie nog nooit vir my gesê jy’s ’n Sisser nie?” vra Harry. Hy hyg na asem van die inspanning. “Al daardie kere dat ek by tannie se huis was – hoekom het jy niks gesê nie?”

“Dompeldorius se bevele. Ek moes ’n ogie oor jou hou, maar niks sê nie, jy was te jonk. Ek is jammer dat ek die lewe vir jou moeilik gemaak het, Harry, maar die Dursleys sou jou nooit na my laat kom het nie as hulle gedink het jy geniet dit. Dit was nie maklik nie, weet jy. . . . maar o, genadetjie tog,” kla sy en wring weer haar hande, “as Dompeldorius hiervan moet hoor – hoe kon Mundungus weggaan, hy was veronderstel om tot middernag op diens te wees – *waar* is hy? Hoe gaan ek vir Dompeldorius vertel wat gebeur het? Ek kan nie appareer nie.”

“Ek het ’n uil, gebruik haar.” Harry kreun. Dit voel of sy ruggraat onder Dudley se gewig gaan knak.

“Harry, jy verstaan nie! Dompeldorius moet *dadelik* optree, die Ministerie het hul eie metodes om minderjarige toordery op te spoor, hulle weet reeds, glo my.”

“Maar ek het van Dementors ontslae geraak, ek *moes* toor – hulle sal darem seker meer bekommerd wees oor wat die Dementors hier in Wisteriastraat doen, of hoe?”

"O liewe, ek wens dit was so, maar ek is bevrees – MUNDUNGUS FLETCHER, EK GAAN JOU VERMOORI!"

Daar is 'n harde klapgeluid, en 'n sterk reuk van drank gemeng met ou tabak hang in die lug toe 'n dikkerige, ongeskeerde man in 'n flenteroorjas reg voor hulle appear. Hy het kort bakbene, lang toingrige rooi hare en bloedbelope, sakkerige oë wat hom soos 'n droewige Basset-hond laat lyk. Hy hou 'n silwer bondel vas wat Harry dadelik as 'n onsigbaarheidsmantel herken.

"Wat's fout, Freya?" vra hy en kyk van tant Freya na Harry en Dudley. "Werk jy nie meer in die geheim nie?"

"Ek sal vir jōu geheim!" skree tant Freya. "Dementors, jou ellendige, lui, nikswerd dief!"

"Dementors?" herhaal Mundungus geskok. "Dementors, hier?"

"Ja, hier, jou nuttelose hoop vlermuismis, hier!" skree tant Freya. "Dementors het die seun tydens jou wagbeurt aangeval!"

"Jislaaik," sê Mundungus swakkies, terwyl hy van tant Freya na Harry en weer terug kyk. "Jislaaik, ek –"

"En jy gaan koop gesteelde hekseketels! Het ek nie vir jou gesê om nie te gaan nie? Het ek nie?"

"Ek – wel, ek –" Mundungus lyk baie ongemaklik. "Dit – dit was 'n baie goeie sakegeleentheid, sien –"

Tant Freya lig die arm waaraan haar tousak hang en slaan Mundungus deur die gesig en oor die blaaië daarmee. Tê oordeel na die klaterende geluide is die sak vol blikke katkos.

"Eina – los my – los my, jou mal heks! Iemand moet vir Dompeldorius gaan sê!"

"Ja – iemand – gaan!" gil tant Freya terwyl sy die sak katkos oor Mundungus se lyf swaai. "En – dit – gaan – jy – wees – en – jy – kan – vir – hom – vertel – hoekom – jy – nie – hier – was – om – te – help – nie!"

"Hou tog net op!" sê Mundungus, sy arms oor sy kop. "Ek gaan, ek gaan!"

En met 'n harde klapgeluid verdwyn hy.

"Ek hoop Dompeldorius vermoor hom!" sê tant Freya met gevoel. "Komaan, Harry, waarvoor wag jy?"

Harry besluit om nie sy laaste bietjie asem te mors deur te probeer verduidelik dat hy skaars onder Dudley se gewig kan loop nie. Hy hys die halfbewustelose Dudley op en steier verder.

"Ek gaan saam met jou tot by die deur," sê tant Freya toe hulle by Ligusterlaan indraai. "Net ingeval daar nog van hulle in die rondte is. O genade, wat 'n katastrofe. . . en jy moes alleen teen hulle veg. . . en Dompeldorius het gesê ons moet tot elke prys keer dat

jy, toor. . . Wel, ek skat gedane sake het geen keer nie. . . maar die vet is nou in die vuur."

"So," blaas Harry, "Dompeldorius . . . het my . . . laat dophou?"

"Natuurlik het hy," sê tant Freya ongeduldig. "Het jy gedink hy sal jou op jou eie laat rond dwaal ná wat in Junie gebeur het? Grote genade, kind, hulle het vir my gesê jy's intelligent. Goed, gaan in en bly daar," sê sy toe hulle by Nommer Vier kom. "Ek reken iemand sal binnekort met jou in aanraking kom."

"Wat gaan tannie nou doen?" vra Harry vinnig.

"Ek gaan reguit huis toe," sê tant Freya terwyl sy sidderend na die donker straat staar. "Ek moet wag vir verdere instruksies. Bly binne in die huis. Goeienag."

"Wag net, moenie nou al gaan nie! Ek moet weet –"

Maar tant Freya is reeds op pad! Haar pantoffels klap en haar tousesak klater.

"Wag!" skree Harry agterna. Daar is miljoene vrae wat hy wil vra vir enigeen wat met Dompeldorius kontak het, maar tant Freya word binne sekondes deur die donkerte ingesluk. Harry sug, hys Dudley terug op sy skouer en stap pynlik stadig met Nommer Vier se tuinpaadjie op.

Die portaallig is aan. Harry druk sy towerstaf in sy jeans se gordel, lui die klokkie en sien hoe tant Petunia se buitelyne groter en groter word, vreemd verwing deur die risselglas van die voordeur.

"Duddie! Hoog tyd ook, ek het begin – begin – Duddie, wat gaan aan?"

Harry kyk sydelings na Dudley en koes net betyds onder sy arm uit. Dudley swaai 'n oomblik op sy voete, sy gesig 'n bleekgroen kleur. . . dan maak hy sy mond oop en gooi oor die deurmat op.

"DUDDIE! Duddie, wat makeer jou? Vernon? VERNON!"

Harry se oom storm uit die woonkamer en sy walrusse bewe onrustig soos dit altyd maak wanneer hy ontsteld is. Hy skarrel nader om vir tant Petunia hand te gee om die bewende Dudley oor die drumpel te help sonder om in die plas braaksel te trap.

"Hy's siek, Vernon!"

"Wat makeer, seun? Wat het gebeur? Het mevrou Polkiss vir jou iets snaaks gegee om te eet?"

"Hoekom is jy so vol stof, skat? Het jy op die grond gelê?"

"Wag 'n bietjie – jy's nie aangerand nie, of hoe, seun?"

Tant Petunia begin skree.

"Bel die polisie, Vernon! Bel die polisie! Duddie, skat, praat met Mammie! Wat het hulle aan jou gedoen?"

Met al die gedoente het hulle van Harry vergeet en dit pas hom

uitstekend. Hy kry dit reg om in te glip net voor oom Vernon die voordeur toeslaan, en terwyl die Dursleys raserig deur die portaal na die kombuis beweeg, loop Harry stillêttjies na die trappe.

“Wie het dit gedoen, seun? Gee vir ons name. Ons sal hulle kry, jy sal sien.”

“Sjii, hy probeer iets sê, Vernon! Wat is dit, Duddie? Sê vir Mammie!”

Harry se voet is op die onderste trap toe Dudley sy stem vind.

“Hy.”

Harry versteen, sy voet op die trap, sy gesig vertrek, gereed vir die ontploffing.

“SEUN! KOM HIER!”

Dis met ’n mengsel van vrees en woede dat Harry sy voet stadig van die trap afhaal en omdraai om die Dursleys te volg.

Die kraaskoon kombuis glinster onnatuurlik ná die donkerte daar buite. Tant Petunia help vir Dudley na ’n stoel. Hy lyk nog steeds baie groen en sweterig. Oom Vernon staan voor die opwasbak en gluur na Harry deur klein, vernoude ogies.

“Wat het jy aan my seun gedoen?” grom hy dreigend.

“Niks,” sê Harry, wat goed weet dat oom Vernon hom nie gaan glo nie.

“Wat het hy aan jou gedoen, Duddie?” vra tant Petunia in ’n bewerige stem terwyl sy die braaksel van Dudley se leerbaadjie afvee. “Was dit – was dit jy-weet-wat, skat? Het hy – sy ding gebruik?”

Dudley knik bewerig.

“Ek het nie!” sê Harry skerp toe tant Petunia ’n kreet uiter en oom Vernon sy vuiste lig. “Ek het niks aan hom gedoen nie, dit was nie ek nie, dit was –”

Maar op daardie presiese oomblik swiep ’n steenuil deur die kombuisvenster. Hy mis oom Vernon se kop rakelings, seil deur die kombuis, laat val ’n groot perkamentkoevert wat hy in sy snawel gedra het voor Harry se voete, draai sierlik sodat die punte van sy vlerke die bokant van die yskas net-net raak en vlieg blitssnel uit en weg oor die tuin.

“UILE!” bulder oom Vernon en die bekende aartjie teen sy slaappols ergerlik terwyl hy die kombuisvenster toeslaan. “WEER UILE! EK SAL NIE NOG UILE IN MY HUIS DULD NIE!”

Maar Harry skeur reeds die koevert oop en haal die brief uit. Sy hart klop iewers naby sy adamsappel.

Beste meneer Potter,

Dis is onder ons aandag gebring dat die Patronus-towerspreuk vanaand om drie-en-twintig minute oor nege in 'n Moggelbewoonde area en in die teenwoordigheid van Moggels deur u gebruik is.

Die erns van hierdie oortreding van die Ordonnansie op die Redelike Bepierking op Towyery deur Minderjariges het gelei tot u skorsing van Hogwarts Skool vir Towerkuns en Heksery. Verteenwoordigers van die Ministerie sal binnekort by u woonplek opdaag om u towerstaf te vernietig.

Aangesien u reeds tevore 'n amptelike waarskuwing vir 'n oortreding onder Seksie 13 van die Internasionale Konfederasie van die Towenaars se Statuut van Geheimhouding ontvang het, moet ons u tot ons spyt mededeel dat u teenwoordigheid by 'n dissiplinêre verhoor by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns vereis word en wel om 9 vm. op die twaalfde Augustus.

Voorspoed u toegewens

Die uwe

Mafalda Hopkirk

Kantoor vir die Ongemagtigde Gebruik van Towerkuns

Ministerie vir Towerkuns

Harry lees die brief twee keer deur. Hy is net vaagweg daarvan bewus dat oom Vernon en tant Petunia praat. Dis ysig koud binne-in sy kop. Een feit het sy bewussyn soos 'n pyl binnegedring. Hy is uit Hogwarts geskors. Dis verby. Hy gaan nooit weer terug nie.

Hy kyk op na die Dursleys. Oom Vernon se gesig is pers en hy skree, sy vuiste nog steeds gelig. Tant Petunia se arms is om Dudley geslaan, wat weer naar word.

Dis of Harry se brein wakker word. Verteenwoordigers van die Ministerie sal binnekort by u woonplek opdaag om u towerstaf te vernietig. Daar is net een ding om te doen. Hy moet vlug – nou. Hy weet nie waarheen om te gaan nie, maar hy weet een ding: by Hogwarts of daar buite, hy moet sy towerstaf hê. Asof in 'n droom trek hy sy towerstaf uit sy gordel en draai om om uit die kombuis te stap.

“Waarheen dink jy gaan jy?” skree oom Vernon. Toe Harry nie antwoord nie, beur hy oor die kombuisvloer en blokkeer die deur na die portaal. “Ek is nog nie klaar met jou nie, seun!”

“Gee pad,” sê Harry gedemp.

“Jy bly net hier en verduidelik hoe my seun –”

“As jy nie padgee nie, toor ek jou,” sê Harry en lig sy towerstaf.

“Daardie een werk nie met my nie!” snou oom Vernon. “Ek weet jy mag nie toor buite daardie malhuis wat jy 'n skool noem nie!”

“Die malhuis het my uitgegooi, sê Harry. “Ek kan nou doen wat ek wil. Jy het drie sekondes. Een – twee –”

’n Dawerende KLAP vul die huis. Tant Petunia skree, oom Vernon gil en koes, en vir die derde keer dié nag soek Harry die bron van ’n versteuring wat hy nie veroorsaak het nie. Hy sien dit dadelik. ’n bedwelmdede en verfrommelde nonnetjiesuill sit buite op die kombuis se vensterbank nadat hy so pas in die toe venster vasgevlieg het.

Harry ignoreer oom Vernon se gefolterde kreet van “UILE!”, hardloop nader en wring die venster oop. Die uil steek sy been uit waaraan ’n klein rolletjie perkament vasgemaak is, skud sy vere en vlieg weg die oomblik toe Harry die brief neem. Harry vou die tweede boodskap met bewende hande oop. Dis baie haastig en vol kladkolle in swart ink geskryf.

Harry –

Dompeldorius het so pas by die Ministerie opgedaag en hy probeer om alles op te klaar. MOENIE JOU OOM EN TANTE SE HUIS VERLAAT NIE. MOENIE WEER TOOR NIE. MOENIE JOU TOWERSTAF AFSTAAN NIE.

Arthur Weasley

Dompeldorius probeer om alles op te klaar. . . wat beteken dit? Het Dompeldorius die mag om die Ministerie vir Towerkuns te beïnvloed? Is daar ’n kans dat hy terug Hogwarts toe sal kan gaan? ’n Klein sprankie hoop spring in Harry se bors op en word amper dadelik deur paniek gesmoor – hoe moet hy weier om sy towerstaf af te staan sonder dat hy toor? Hy sal teen verteenwoordigers van die Ministerie te staan kom, dalk ’n tweegeveg, en as hy dit doen, sal hy gelukkig wees as hy nie Azkaban toe gestuur word nie, vergeet van die skorsing.

Hy dink vinnig. Hy kan weghardloop en die risiko loop dat die Ministerie hom vang, of hier bly en vir hulle wag. Die versoeking is groot om die eerste uitweg te volg, maar hy weet meneer Weasley dra sy belange op die hart. . . en Dompeldorius het darem al baie erger probleme as dit uit die weg geruim.

“Goed,” sê Harry, “ek het van plan verander, ek bly.”

Hy gaan sit by die kombuistafel teenoor Dudley en tant Petunia. Dit lyk of dié onverwagte verandering in sy planne die Dursleys onkant gevang het. Tant Petunia staar wanhopig na oom Vernon. Die aartjie teen oom Vernon se slaap klop erger as ooit.

“Van wie kom al hierdie verbrande uile?” grom hy.

“Die eerste een was van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns om my te gekors,” sê Harry bedaad. Sy ore is gespits vir enige geluide daar buite ingeval die Ministerie se verteenwoordigers op pad is, en dis makliker en stiller om oom Vernon se vrae te beantwoord as om hom te laat raas en skel. “Die tweede een was van my vriend Ron se pa wat by die Ministerie werk.”

“Ministerie vir Towerkuns?” bulder oom Vernon. “Mense soos jy in die regering? O, dit verklaar alles, alles, g’n wonder die land is besig om tot niet te gaan nie.”

Toe Harry nie antwoord nie, vra oom Vernon glurend: “En hoekom is jy gekors?”

“Omdat ek getoor het.”

“AHA!” brul oom Vernon en slaan met sy vuus op die yskas se bokant, wat oopspring sodat etlike van Dudley se laevetsnoepgoed uitrol en op die vloer val. “Dan erken jy dit! Wat het jy aan Dudley gedoen?”

“Niks,” sê Harry effens minder bedaad. “Dit was nie ek nie –”

“Was,” prewel Dudley skielik en oom Vernon en tant Petunia waai ladelik dat Harry moet stilbly terwyl hulle laag oor Dudley buk.

“Gaan voort, seun,” sê oom Vernon, “wat het hy gedoen?”

“Vertel vir ons, skat,” fluister tant Petunia.

“Sy towerstaf na my gewys,” mompel Dudley.

“Ja, ek het, maar ek het dit nie gebruik nie –” begin Harry ergerlik, “maar –”

“BLY STIL!” brul oom Vernon en tant Petunia gelyk.

“Gaan voort, seun,” herhaal oom Vernon en sy snor bewe verwoed.

“Alles het donker geword,” sê Dudley skor. “Alles donker. En toe h-hoor ek . . . dinge. Binne-in m-my kop.”

Oom Vernon en tant Petunia verwissel geskokte blikke. Die towerkuns is heel onder op hulle lys van gunsteling – met kort daarna bure wat meer as hulle met die verbod op tuinslange kul – en mense wat stemme hoor, is beslis in die onderste tien. Dis duidelik dat hulle dink Dudley is besig om mal te word.

“Watter soort dinge het jy gehoor, Poplap?” vra tant Petunia uitasem. Haar gesig is wit en daar is trane in haar oë.

Dit lyk of Dudley nie daaroor kan praat nie. Hy sidder weer en skud sy groot blonde kop. Ten spyte van sy doodse gevoel van angs is Harry nuuskierig. Dementors laat ’n mens die ergste oomblikke van jou lewe herleef. Waarna was die bedorwe, gepamperlangde Dudley gedwing om te luister?

“Hoekom het jy geval, seun?” vra oom Vernon in ’n onnatuurlik

sagte stem, die soort stem wat hy langs die bed van 'n baie siek persoon sal gebruik.

"St-truikel," sê Dudley bewerig. "En toe –"

Hy beduie na sy massiewe borskas. Harry verstaan. Dudley onthou die klam koue wat jou longe vul as alle hoop en geluk uit jou gesuig word.

"Aaklig," sê Dudley skor. "Koud. Verskriklik koud."

"Goed," sê oom Vernon in 'n stem wat spreek van gedwonge kalmte, terwyl tant Petunia 'n bekommerde hand op Dudley se voorkop sit om sy temperatuur te voel. "Wat het toe gebeur, Dudders?"

"Dit het gevoel . . . gevoel . . . asof . . . asof . . ."

"Asof jy nooit weer gelukkig gaan wees nie," voltooi Harry bot.

"Ja," fluister Dudley bewend.

"So!" sê oom Vernon en kom orent, sy stem weer herstel tot sy volle en aansienlike volume. "Jy het die een of ander mal tower spreuk oor my seun uitgespreek sodat hy stemme hoor en glo hy is – gedoem tot ellende of so iets, hè?"

"Hoeveel keer moet ek vir julle sê," sê Harry, wat dreig om beheer oor sy humeur en sy stem te verloor, "dit was nie ek nie! Dit was 'n paar Dementors!"

"'n Paar – watsegoed?"

"De – men – tors," sê Harry stadig en duidelik. "Twee van hulle."

"En wat de dinges is Dementors?"

"Hulle is wagt by Azkaban, die towenaarstronk," sê tant Petunia. 'n Dawerende stilte van twee sekondes volg, voor tant Petunia haar hand oor haar mond klap asof sy 'n liederlike vloekwoord gesê het. Oom Vernon gaap haar aan. Harry se gedagtes tol. Tant Freya was al erg – maar tant Petunia?

"Hoe weet jy dit?" vra hy verbaas vir haar.

Tant Petunia lyk baie ontsteld. Sy loer vreesbevange en verskonend na oom Vernon en laat sak dan haar hand effens sodat haar perdetande sigbaar word.

"Ek het gehoor – toe daardie gruwelike seun – vir haar van hulle vertel het – jare gelede," sê sy hortend.

"As jy my ma en pa bedoel, hoekom gebruik jy nie hulle name nie?" sê Harry hard, maar tant Petunia ignoreer hom. Sy lyk verskriklik verward.

Harry is geskok. Behalwe een uitbarsting jare gelede toe tant Petunia vir Harry geskree het dat sy ma 'n frats was, het hy haar nog nooit van haar suster hoor praat nie. Hy is verstom dat sy hierdie brokkie inligting oor die towerwêreld so lank onthou het, terwyl sy gewoonlik haar uiterste bes doen om te maak asof dit nie bestaan nie.

Oom Vernon maak sy mond oop, maak dit weer toe, maak dit nog 'n slag oop, maak dit toe en dan, terwyl hy oenskynlik sukkel om te onthou hoe om te praat, maak hy dit 'n derde keer oop en sê skot. "Dan – dan – hm – dan bestaan – hm – hulle regtig – hierdie Demien-watsegoed?"

Tant Petunia knik.

Oom Vernon kyk van tant Petunia na Dudley na Harry asof hy hoop dat iemand "April-gek!" gaan skree. Toe niemand dit doen nie, maak hy sy mond weer oop, maar hy bly die worsteling vir nog woorde gespaar toe die derde uil van die aand opdaag. Dit skiet soos 'n kanonkoeël van vere deur die oop venster en land klaterend op die kombuistafel sodat al drie Dursleys wip van die skrik. Harry trek 'n koevert wat amptelik lyk uit die uil se snawel en skeur dit oop terwyl die uil weer in die nag verdwyn.

"Genoeg – verbrande – uile," mompel oom Vernon, strompel na die venster en slaan dit verwoed toe.

Beste meneer Potter,

Met verwysing na ons brief van ongeveer twee-en-twintig minute gelede: Die Minister vir Towerkuns het sy besluit om jou towerstaf onmiddellik te laat vernietig, hersien. Jy mag jou towerstaf hou tot en met die dissiplinêre verhoor op die twaalfde Augustus, wanneer 'n amptelike besluit geneem sal word.

Na aanleiding van gesprekke met die skoolhoof van Hogwarts Skool vir Towerkuns en Heksery, het die Minister ingestem dat die kwessie van jou skorsing ook dan beslis sal word. Beskou jou skorsing dus as opgeskort hangende verdere ondersoeke.

Met beste wense

Die uwe

Mafalda Hopkirk

Kantoor vir die Ongemagtigde Gebruik van Towerkuns
Ministerie vir Towerkuns

Harry lees die brief drie keer vinnig deur. Die pynlike kramp in sy bors verslap effens van verligting by die wete dat hy nie meer definitief geskors is nie, hoewel sy vrese nog glad nie besweer is nie. Dit lyk of alles van die verhoor op 12 Augustus afhang.

Oom Vernon se "Wel?" roep hom terug na sy onmiddellike omgewing. "Wat nou? Het hulle jou tot iets gevonniss? Het julle spul ooit die doodsvonniss?" voeg hy hoopvol as 'n soort nagedagte by.

"Ek moet na 'n verhoor gaan," sê Harry.

"En dan vonnis hulle jou daar?"

"Ek dink so."

"Ek sal dus nie moed opgee nie," sê oom Vernon leedvermakerig.

"Wel, as dit al is," sê Harry en staan op. Hy kan nie wag om alleen te wees nie, om te dink en dalk 'n brief aan Ron, Hermien of Sirius te stuur.

"NEE, DIS VERBRANDS NIE AL NIE!" bulder oom Vernon. "SIT!"

"Wat nou weer?" vra Harry ongeduldig.

"DUDLEY!" brul oom Vernon. "Ek wil weet wat presies met my seun gebeur het!"

"GOED DAN!" gil Harry, wat nou so kwaad is dat rooi en goue vonke uit sy towerstaf, wat hy nog steeds in sy hand vashou, se punt spat. Al drie Dursleys deins verskrik terug.

"Ek en Dudley was in die gangetjie tussen Magnoliasingel en Wisteriastraat," sê Harry en probeer met moeite sy humeur beteuel. "Dudley het my getart en ek het my towerstaf uitgehaal, maar dit nie gebruik nie. Toe daag twee Dementors skielik op –"

"Maar wat IS Dementoids?" vra oom Vernon dreigend. "Wat DOEN hulle?"

"Ek het mos gesê – hulle suig al die geluk uit jou uit," sê Harry. "En as hulle die kans kry, soen hulle jou –"

"Soen jou?" sê oom Vernon en sy oë peul effens uit. "Soen jou?"

"Dis wat hulle dit noem as hulle jou siel deur jou mond uitsuig." Tant Petunia gee 'n gedempte gil.

"Sy siel? Hulle het nie – hy het nog sy –"

Sy gryp Dudley se skouers en skud hom asof sy wil hoor of sy siel daar iewers binne-in hom ratel.

"Natuurlik het hulle nie sy siel gekry nie, julle sou geweet het as dit die geval was," sê Harry ongeduldig.

"Met hulle geveg, hè, seun?" sê oom Vernon hard. Hy lyk soos iemand wat sukkel om die gesprek weer na 'n vlak te bring wat hy verstaan. "Hulle lekker opgedons, of hoe?"

"Jy kan nie 'n Dementor opdens nie," sê Harry deur geklemde kake.

"Hoekom makeer hy dan niks?" spoeg oom Vernon. "Hoekom is hy dan nie leeg nie?"

"Omdat ek die Patronus gebruik het –"

WHOESJ. Daar is 'n geklater, 'n warreling van vlerke, 'n wolk stof en 'n vierde uil skiet uit die vuurherd.

"GENUGTIG!" brul oom Vernon en trek bosse hare uit sy snor, iets wat hy lanklaas moes doen. "EK WIL GEEN UILE HIER HÊ NIE, EK HET MOS GESÊ EK SAL DIT NIE DULD NIE!"

Maar Harry is reeds besig om 'n rol perkament van die uil se been af te haal. Hy is so seker dat hierdie brief van Dompeldorius kom en dat dit alles sal verduidelik – die Dementors, tant Freya, waarmee die Ministerie besig is, hoe Dompeldorius beplan om alles op te klaar – dat hy vir die eerste keer in sy lewe teleurgesteld is toe hy Sirius se handtekening sien. Hy ignoreer oom Vernon se tirade oor uile en trek sy oë op skrefies teen 'n tweede wolk stof toe die uil terug, deur die skoorsteen uitvlieg. Toe lees hy Sirius se boodskap.

Arthur het so pas vir ons vertel wat gebeur het. Moenie weer uit die huis gaan nie, wat ook al gebeur.

Vir Harry is dit só 'n ontoereikende reaksie op alles wat reeds vanaag gebeur het, dat hy die stuk perkament omdraai op soek na die rest van die brief, maar daar is niks meer nie.

Nou wil sy humeur van voor af handuit ruk. Gaan *niemand* eens "mooi so" sê nadat hy twee Dementors eiehandig afgeweer het nie? Sowel meneer Weasley as Sirius laat dit klink asof hy oortree het en dat hulle hul preke spaar tot hulle weet hoeveel kwaad gedoen is.

"'n swerm uile wat in en uit my huis skiet. Ek sal dit nie duld nie, seun, ek sal nie –"

"Ek kan nie die uile keer nie," snou Harry terwyl hy Sirius se brief in sy vuus opfrommel.

"Ek wil die waarheid weet oor wat vanaag gebeur het!" blaf oom Vernon. "As dit Demenders is, wat Dudley seergemaak het, hoekom word jy geskors? Jy het ge-jy-weet-wat, jy't dit erken!"

Harry trek sy asem stadig in in 'n poging om tot bedaring te kom. Sy kop begin al weer pyn. As hy net uit die kombuis en weg van die Dursleys kan kom.

"Ek het die Patronus-towerspreuk uitgespreek om van die Dementors ontslae te raak," sê hy en dwing homself om kalm te bly. "Dis al wat teen hulle werk."

"Maar wat *soek* die Dementoids in Little Whinging?" sê oom Vernon in 'n beledigde stem.

"Ek weet nie," sê Harry moeg. "Ek het geen idee nie."

Sy kop klop in die skerp gloed van die buisligte. Sy woede is besig om weg te vloei. Hy voel gedreineer en moeg. Die Dursleys staan almal na hom.

"Dis jy," sê oom Vernon afgemete. "Dit het iets met jou te doen, seun, ek weet dit. Hoekom anders sal hulle hierheen kom? Hoekom anders sal hulle in daardie laan wees? Jy moet die enigste – die enig-

ste – ” Dis duidelik dat hy nie die woord “towenaar” kan sê nie. “Die enigste jy-weet-wat vir myle wees.”

“Ek weet nie hoekom hulle hier was nie.”

Maar oom Vernon se woorde spoor Harry se moeë brein aan tot aksie. Hoekom *het* die Dementors na Little Whinging gekom? Hoe *kon* dit blote toeval wees dat hulle in die gangetjie opgedaag het net mooi waar Harry was? Het iemand hulle gestuur? Het die Ministerie vir Towerkuns beheer oor die Dementors verloor? Het hulle Azkaban verlaat en by Woldemort aangesluit soos Dompeldorius voorspel het?

“Hierdie Demembers is wagte by die een of ander tronk vir getiktes?” vra oom Vernon weer.

“Ja,” sê Harry.

As sy kop net nie so seer was nie, as hy net uit die kombuis kan stap en na sy donker slaapkamer kan gaan waar hy kan *dink*.

“Oho! Hulle wou jou kom arresteer!” sê oom Vernon met die triomfantlike uitdrukking van iemand wat ’n onaanvegbare gevolgtrekking gemaak het. “Dis wat aangaan, hè, seun? Jy’s op vlug vir die gereg?”

“Natuurlik is ek nie,” sê Harry en skud sy kop asof hy ’n vlieg wegjaag. Sy brein werk nou vinnig.

“Hoekom dan – ”

“Hy moet hulle gestuur het,” sê Harry saggies, meer vir homself as vir oom Vernon.

“Wat sê jy? Wie het hulle gestuur?”

“Die heer Woldemort,” sê Harry.

Hy besef vaagweg hoe vreemd dit is dat die Dursleys, wat inmekaarkrimp, terugdeins en skree as hulle woorde soos “towenaar”, “towerkuns” of “towerstal” hoor, nie eens effens sidder as hulle die naam van die boosste towenaar van alle tye hoor nie.

“Die heer – wag ’n bietjie,” sê oom Vernon, sy gesig op ’n plooi. Iets soos begrip daag in sy varkogies. “Ek het daardie naam al gehoor – dit was die een wat – ”

“My ouers vermoor het, ja,” sê Harry stroef.

“Maar hy’s weg,” sê oom Vernon ongeduldig en sonder enige blyke dat die moord op Harry se ouers ’n pynlike onderwerp kan wees. “Daardie reus het so gesê. Hy’s weg.”

“Hy’s terug,” sê Harry swaarmoedig.

Dit voel vreemd om ewe kalm hier in tant Petunia se sjirurgies skoon kombuis langs die heel beste yskas en die wyeskermtelevisie met oom Vernon oor die heer Woldemort te sit en praat. Dis of die aankoms van Dementors in Little Whinging die groot, onsigbare

muur afgebreek het wat Ligusterlaan 4 se onverbiddelike nief-towerwêreld van die wêreld aan die ander kant skei. Harry se twee lewens het op 'n manier saamgesmelt en alles is onderstebo. Die Dursleys vra vir besonderhede oor die towerwêreld en tant Freya ken vir Albus Dompeldorius; Dementors vlieg in Little Whinging rond en hy gaan dalk nooit weer terug na Hogwarts nie. Harry se kop klop nog pynliker.

“Terug?” fluister tant Petunia.

Sy kyk na Harry soos sy nog nooit tevore na hom gekyk het nie. Enskielik, vir die eerste keer in sy lewe, besef Harry ten volle dat tant Petunia sy ma se suster is. Hy kan nie verklaar hoekom dit hom juis nou met soveel krag tref nie. Al wat hy weet, is dat hy nie die enigste mens in die vertrek is wat 'n begrip het van wat dit kan beteken as die heer Woldemort terug is nie. Tant Petunia het nog nooit in haar lewe op hierdie manier na hom gekyk nie. Haar groot bleek oë (so anders as haar suster s'n) is nie meer op skrefies van weersin en woede nie, hulle is groot en vol angs. Dit lyk of die verwoede geveins waarmee sy nog Harry se lewe lank volhou dat daar geen towerkragte en geen ander wêreld is as dié een wat sy en oom Vernon bewoon nie, weggeval het.

“Ja,” sê Harry en hy praat nou direk met tant Petunia. “Hy het 'n maand gelede teruggekom. Ek het hom gesien.”

Haar hande gryp Dudley se leerbeklede skouers vas.

“Wag 'n bietjie,” sê oom Vernon en kyk van sy vrou na Harry en weer terug, duidelik uit die veld geslaan en verwar deur die ongewone begrip wat skielik tussen hulle bestaan. “Wag 'n bietjie. Hierdie heer Woldewatookal is terug, sê jy.”

“Ja.”

“Die een wat jou ouers vermoor het.”

“Ja.”

“En nou stuur hy die Dementias agter jou aan?”

“Dit lyk so,” sê Harry.

“Ek sien,” sê oom Vernon en kyk van sy bleekgesigsvrou na Harry. Hy trek sy broek op. Dit lyk of hy swel. Sy groot pers gesig rek voor Harry se oë. “Wel, dis dan opgelos,” sê hy en sy hemspeknop span styf soos hy hom opblaas. “*Trap uit hierdie huis uit, seun!*”

“Wat?” sê Harry.

“Jy't my gehoor – TRAP!” bulk oom Vernon sodat selfs tant Petunia en Dudley wip. “UIT! UIT! Ek moes dit al jare gelede gedoen het! Uile wat die plek vir 'n nes gebruik, poedings wat ontplof, die helfte van die sitkamer verwoes, Dudley se stert, Marge wat teen die plafon rondbons en daardie vlieënde Ford Anglia – UIT! UIT!”

Dis klaarpraat! Jou tyd is verby! Jy bly nie hier as die een of ander malle agter jou aan is nie, jy gaan nie my vrou en my seun se lewe in gevaar stel nie, jy gaan ons nie in die moeilikheid laat beland nie. As jy jou nikswerd ouers se paadjie gaan stap, is ek klaar met jou! UIT!"

Harry staan vasgenaël. Die briewe van die Ministerie, meneer Weasley en Sirius is opgefrommel in sy linkerhand. *Moenie weer uit die huis gaan nie, wat ook al gebeur. MOENIE JOU OOM EN TANTE SE HUIS VERLAAT NIE.*

"Het jy nie gehoor nie?" sê oom Vernon en buk nader, sy mas-siewe pers gesig so naby Harry s'n dat Harry spatseltjies spoeg in sy gesig voel. "Weg is jy! Jy was 'n halfuur gelede alte gretig om pad te gee! Ek staan agter jou! Trap en moet jou gesig nooit weer hier wys nie! Hoekom ons jou in die eerste plek gevat het, weet nugter. Marge was reg, dit moes die weeshuis gewees het. Ons was heeltemal te sag met jou, het gedink ons sal dit uit jou kan pers, gedink ons sal jou normaal kan grootmaak, maar jy was van die begin af vrot en ek het genoeg gehad – uile!"

Die vyfde uil zoem so vinnig deur die skoorsteen dat dit die vloer tref voor dit weer met 'n kras gekrys opstyg. Harry steek sy hand uit om die rooi koevert te gryp, maar die uil seil oor sy kop en vlieg reguit na tant Petunia, wat gil en koes met haar arms oor haar gesig. Die uil laat val die rooi koevert op haar kop, swenk en vlieg reguit op deur die skoorsteen.

Harry storm nader om die brief op te tel, maar tant Petunia spring hom voor.

"Jy kan dit oopmaak as jy wil," sê Harry, "maar ek sal in elk geval hoor wat daarin staan. Dis 'n Skeller."

"Los dit, Petunia!" brul oom Vernon. "Moenie daaraan raak nie, dit kan gevaarlik wees!"

"Dis aan my geadresseer," sê tant Petunia in 'n bewerige stem. "Dis aan my geadresseer, Vernon, kyk! Mev. Petunia Dursley, Die Kombuis, Ligusterlaan 4 –"

Sy snak geskok na asem. Die rooi koevert het begin rook.

"Maak dit oop!" moedig Harry haar aan. "Maak dit oop! Dit gaan in elk geval gebeur."

"Nee."

Tant Petunia se hand skud. Sy kyk wild in die kombuis rond asof sy 'n wegkomkans soek, maar dis te laat – die koevert bars in vlamme uit. Tant Petunia skree en laat dit val.

'n Vreeslike stem vul die kombuis en galm deur die klein ruimte. Dit kom uit die brandende brief op die vloer.

"Onthou my laaste, Petunia."

Tant Petunia lyk asof sy gaan flou word. Sy sak op die stoel langs Dudley neer met haar gesig in haar hande. Die oorblyfsels van die loevert smeul in stilte tot as

"Wat gaan aan?" vra oom Vernon skor. "Wat – ek verstaan nie – him, Petunia?"

Tant Petunia sê niks. Dudley staar verdwaas na sy ma met 'n mond wat oophang. Die stilte rek aaklig uit. Harry kyk verwilderd na sy tante, sy kop kan bars van pyn.

"Petunia, skat?" sê oom Vernon floutjies. "P-Petunia?"

Sy lig haar kop. Sy bewê nog steeds. Sy sluk.

"Die seun – die seun sal moet bly, Vernon," sê sy swakkies.

"W-wat?"

"Hy bly," sê sy. Sy kyk nie na Harry nie. Sy staan op.

"Hy . . . maar Petunia . . ."

"As ons hom uitgooi, sal die bure praat," sê sy en staan op. Sy is vinnig besig om haar gewone flink, kortaf manier te herwin, hoewel sy nog steeds baie bleek is. "Hulle sal lastige vrae vra, hulle sal wil weet waarheen hy is. Ons sal hom moet hou."

Oom Vernon blaas af soos 'n ou binneband.

"Maar Petunia, skat –"

Tant Petunia ignoreer hom. Sy draai na Harry.

"Bly in jou kamer," sê sy. "Jy gaan nie uit die huis nie. Gaan bed toe."

Harry roer nie.

"Van wie het daardie Skeller gekom?"

"Moenie vrae vra nie," snou tant Petunia.

"Het jy kontak met towenaars?"

"Ek het gesê jy moet kamer toe gaan!"

"Wat het dit beteken? Onthou die laaste wat?"

"Gaan kamer toe!"

"Hoekom –"

"HET JY NIE JOU TANTE GEHOOR NIE? GAAN KAMER TOE!"

CHAPTER THREE



THE ADVANCE GUARD

I've just been attacked by dementors and I might be expelled from Hogwarts. I want to know what's going on and when I'm going to get out of here.

Harry copied these words onto three separate pieces of parchment the moment he reached the desk in his dark bedroom. He addressed the first to Sirius, the second to Ron, and the third to Hermione. His owl, Hedwig, was off hunting; her cage stood empty on the desk. Harry paced the bedroom waiting for her to come back, his head pounding, his brain too busy for sleep even though his eyes stung and itched with tiredness. His back ached from carrying Dudley home,

and the two lumps on his head where the window and Dudley had hit him were throbbing painfully.

Up and down he paced, consumed with anger and frustration, grinding his teeth and clenching his fists, casting angry looks out at the empty, star-strewn sky every time he passed the window. Dementors sent to get him, Mrs. Figg and Mundungus Fletcher tailing him in secret, then suspension from Hogwarts and a hearing at the Ministry of Magic — and *still* no one was telling him what was going on.

And what, *what*, had that Howler been about? Whose voice had echoed so horribly, so menacingly, through the kitchen?

Why was he still trapped here without information? Why was everyone treating him like some naughty kid? *Don't do any more magic, stay in the house.*

He kicked his school trunk as he passed it, but far from relieving his anger he felt worse, as he now had a sharp pain in his toe to deal with in addition to the pain in the rest of his body.

Just as he limped past the window, Hedwig soared through it with a soft rustle of wings like a small ghost.

“About time!” Harry snarled, as she landed lightly on top of her cage. “You can put that down, I’ve got work for you!”

Hedwig’s large round amber eyes gazed reproachfully at him over the dead frog clamped in her beak.

“Come here,” said Harry, picking up the three small rolls of parchment and a leather thong and tying the scrolls to her scaly leg. “Take these straight to Sirius, Ron, and Hermione and don’t come back here without good long replies. Keep pecking them till they’ve

written decent-length answers if you've got to. Understand?"

Hedwig gave a muffled hooting noise, beak still full of frog.

"Get going, then," said Harry.

She took off immediately. The moment she'd gone, Harry threw himself down onto his bed without undressing and stared at the dark ceiling. In addition to every other miserable feeling, he now felt guilty that he'd been irritable with Hedwig; she was the only friend he had at number four, Privet Drive. But he'd make it up to her when she came back with Sirius's, Ron's, and Hermione's answers.

They were bound to write back quickly; they couldn't possibly ignore a dementor attack. He'd probably wake up tomorrow to three fat letters full of sympathy and plans for his immediate removal to the Burrow. And with that comforting idea, sleep rolled over him, stifling all further thought.

But Hedwig didn't return next morning. Harry spent the day in his bedroom, leaving it only to go to the bathroom. Three times that day Aunt Petunia shoved food into his room through the cat flap Uncle Vernon had installed three summers ago. Every time Harry heard her approaching he tried to question her about the Howler, but he might as well have interrogated the doorknob for all the answers he got. Otherwise the Dursleys kept well clear of his bedroom. Harry couldn't see the point of forcing his company on them; another row would achieve nothing except perhaps making him so angry he'd perform more illegal magic.

So it went on for three whole days. Harry was filled alternately with restless energy that made him unable to settle to anything, during

which he paced his bedroom again, furious at the whole lot of them for leaving him to stew in this mess, and with a lethargy so complete that he could lie on his bed for an hour at a time, staring dazedly into space, aching with dread at the thought of the Ministry hearing.

What if they ruled against him? What if he *was* expelled and his wand was snapped in half? What would he do, where would he go? He could not return to living full-time with the Dursleys, not now that he knew the other world, the one to which he really belonged. . . . Was it possible that he might be able to move into Sirius's house, as Sirius had suggested a year ago, before he had been forced to flee from the Ministry himself? Would he be allowed to live there alone, given that he was still underage? Or would the matter of where he went next be decided for him, had his breach of the International Statute of Secrecy been severe enough to land him in a cell in Azkaban? Whenever this thought occurred, Harry invariably slid off his bed and began pacing again.

On the fourth night after Hedwig's departure Harry was lying in one of his apathetic phases, staring at the ceiling, his exhausted mind quite blank, when his uncle entered his bedroom. Harry looked slowly around at him. Uncle Vernon was wearing his best suit and an expression of enormous smugness.

"We're going out," he said.

"Sorry?"

"We — that is to say, your aunt, Dudley, and I — are going out."

"Fine," said Harry dully, looking back at the ceiling.

"You are not to leave your bedroom while we are away."

"Okay."

“You are not to touch the television, the stereo, or any of our possessions.”

“Right.”

“You are not to steal food from the fridge.”

“Okay.”

“I am going to lock your door.”

“You do that.”

Uncle Vernon glared at Harry, clearly suspicious of this lack of argument, then stomped out of the room and closed the door behind him. Harry heard the key turn in the lock and Uncle Vernon’s footsteps walking heavily down the stairs. A few minutes later he heard the slamming of car doors, the rumble of an engine, and the unmistakable sound of the car sweeping out of the drive.

Harry had no particular feeling about the Dursleys leaving. It made no difference to him whether they were in the house or not. He could not even summon the energy to get up and turn on his bedroom light. The room grew steadily darker around him as he lay listening to the night sounds through the window he kept open all the time, waiting for the blessed moment when Hedwig returned.

The empty house creaked around him. The pipes gurgled. Harry lay there in a kind of stupor, thinking of nothing, suspended in misery.

And then, quite distinctly, he heard a crash in the kitchen below.

He sat bolt upright, listening intently. The Dursleys couldn’t be back, it was much too soon, and in any case he hadn’t heard their car.

There was silence for a few seconds, and then he heard voices.

Burglars, he thought, sliding off the bed onto his feet — but a split second later it occurred to him that burglars would keep their voices

down, and whoever was moving around in the kitchen was certainly not troubling to do so.

He snatched up his wand from his bedside table and stood facing his bedroom door, listening with all his might. Next moment he jumped as the lock gave a loud click and his door swung open.

Harry stood motionless, staring through the open door at the dark upstairs landing, straining his ears for further sounds, but none came. He hesitated for a moment and then moved swiftly and silently out of his room to the head of the stairs.

His heart shot upward into his throat. There were people standing in the shadowy hall below, silhouetted against the streetlight glowing through the glass door; eight or nine of them, all, as far as he could see, looking up at him.

“Lower your wand, boy, before you take someone’s eye out,” said a low, growling voice.

Harry’s heart was thumping uncontrollably. He knew that voice, but he did not lower his wand.

“Professor Moody?” he said uncertainly.

“I don’t know so much about ‘Professor,’” growled the voice, “never got round to much teaching, did I? Get down here, we want to see you properly.”

Harry lowered his wand slightly but did not relax his grip on it, nor did he move. He had very good reason to be suspicious. He had recently spent nine months in what he had thought was Mad-Eye Moody’s company only to find out that it wasn’t Moody at all, but an impostor; an impostor, moreover, who had tried to kill Harry before being unmasked. But before he could make a decision about what to

do next, a second, slightly hoarse voice floated upstairs.

“It’s all right, Harry. We’ve come to take you away.”

Harry’s heart leapt. He knew that voice too, though he hadn’t heard it for more than a year.

“P-Professor Lupin?” he said disbelievingly. “Is that you?”

“Why are we all standing in the dark?” said a third voice, this one completely unfamiliar, a woman’s. “*Lumos.*”

A wand-tip flared, illuminating the hall with magical light. Harry blinked. The people below were crowded around the foot of the stairs, gazing intently up at him, some craning their heads for a better look.

Remus Lupin stood nearest to him. Though still quite young, Lupin looked tired and rather ill; he had more gray hair than when Harry had said good-bye to him, and his robes were more patched and shabbier than ever. Nevertheless, he was smiling broadly at Harry, who tried to smile back through his shock.

“Oooh, he looks just like I thought he would,” said the witch who was holding her lit wand aloft. She looked the youngest there; she had a pale heart-shaped face, dark twinkling eyes, and short spiky hair that was a violent shade of violet. “Wotcher, Harry!”

“Yeah, I see what you mean, Remus,” said a bald black wizard standing farthest back; he had a deep, slow voice and wore a single gold hoop in his ear. “He looks exactly like James.”

“Except the eyes,” said a wheezy-voiced, silver-haired wizard at the back. “Lily’s eyes.”

Mad-Eye Moody, who had long grizzled gray hair and a large chunk missing from his nose, was squinting suspiciously at Harry

through his mismatched eyes. One of the eyes was small, dark, and beady, the other large, round, and electric blue — the magical eye that could see through walls, doors, and the back of Moody's own head.

“Are you quite sure it's him, Lupin?” he growled. “It'd be a nice lookout if we bring back some Death Eater impersonating him. We ought to ask him something only the real Potter would know. Unless anyone brought any Veritaserum?”

“Harry, what form does your Patronus take?” said Lupin.

“A stag,” said Harry nervously.

“That's him, Mad-Eye,” said Lupin.

Harry descended the stairs, very conscious of everybody still staring at him, stowing his wand into the back pocket of his jeans as he came.

“Don't put your wand there, boy!” roared Moody. “What if it ignited? Better wizards than you have lost buttocks, you know!”

“Who d'you know who's lost a buttock?” the violet-haired woman asked Mad-Eye interestedly.

“Never you mind, you just keep your wand out of your back pocket!” growled Mad-Eye. “Elementary wand safety, nobody bothers about it anymore . . .” He stumped off toward the kitchen. “And I saw that,” he added irritably, as the woman rolled her eyes at the ceiling.

Lupin held out his hand and shook Harry's.

“How are you?” he asked, looking at Harry closely.

“F-fine . . .”

Harry could hardly believe this was real. Four weeks with

nothing, not the tiniest hint of a plan to remove him from Privet Drive, and suddenly a whole bunch of wizards was standing matter-of-factly in the house as though this were a long-standing arrangement. He glanced at the people surrounding Lupin; they were still gazing avidly at him. He felt very conscious of the fact that he had not combed his hair for four days.

"I'm — you're really lucky the Dursleys are out . . ." he mumbled.

"Lucky, ha!" said the violet-haired woman. "It was me that lured them out of the way. Sent a letter by Muggle post telling them they'd been short-listed for the All-England Best-Kept Suburban Lawn Competition. They're heading off to the prize-giving right now. . . . Or they think they are."

Harry had a fleeting vision of Uncle Vernon's face when he realized there was no All-England Best-Kept Suburban Lawn Competition.

"We are leaving, aren't we?" he asked. "Soon?"

"Almost at once," said Lupin, "we're just waiting for the all-clear."

"Where are we going? The Burrow?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Not the Burrow, no," said Lupin, motioning Harry toward the kitchen; the little knot of wizards followed, all still eyeing Harry curiously. "Too risky. We've set up headquarters somewhere undetectable. It's taken a while . . ."

Mad-Eye Moody was now sitting at the kitchen table swigging from a hip flask, his magical eye spinning in all directions, taking in the Dursleys' many labor-saving appliances.

"This is Alastor Moody, Harry," Lupin continued, pointing toward

Moody.

“Yeah, I know,” said Harry uncomfortably; it felt odd to be introduced to somebody he’d thought he’d known for a year.

“And this is Nymphadora —”

“*Don’t* call me Nymphadora, Remus,” said the young witch with a shudder. “It’s Tonks.”

“— Nymphadora Tonks, who prefers to be known by her surname only,” finished Lupin.

“So would you if your fool of a mother had called you ‘Nymphadora,’” muttered Tonks.

“And this is Kingsley Shacklebolt” — he indicated the tall black wizard, who bowed — “Elphias Doge” — the wheezy-voiced wizard nodded — “Dedalus Diggle —”

“We’ve met before,” squeaked the excitable Diggle, dropping his top hat.

“— Emmeline Vance” — a stately looking witch in an emerald-green shawl inclined her head — “Sturgis Podmore” — a square-jawed wizard with thick, straw-colored hair winked — “and Hestia Jones.” A pink-cheeked, black-haired witch waved from next to the toaster.

Harry inclined his head awkwardly at each of them as they were introduced. He wished they would look at something other than him; it was as though he had suddenly been ushered onstage. He also wondered why so many of them were there.

“A surprising number of people volunteered to come and get you,” said Lupin, as though he had read Harry’s mind; the corners of his mouth twitched slightly.

“Yeah, well, the more the better,” said Moody darkly. “We’re your guard, Potter.”

“We’re just waiting for the signal to tell us it’s safe to set off,” said Lupin, glancing out of the kitchen window. “We’ve got about fifteen minutes.”

“Very *clean*, aren’t they, these Muggles?” said the witch called Tonks, who was looking around the kitchen with great interest. “My dad’s Muggle-born and he’s a right old slob. I suppose it varies, just like with wizards?”

“Er — yeah,” said Harry. “Look” — he turned back to Lupin — “what’s going on, I haven’t heard anything from anyone, what’s Vol — ?”

Several of the witches and wizards made odd hissing noises; Dedalus Diggle dropped his hat again, and Moody growled, “*Shut up!*”

“What?” said Harry.

“We’re not discussing anything here, it’s too risky,” said Moody, turning his normal eye on Harry; his magical eye remained pointing up at the ceiling. “*Damn it,*” he added angrily, putting a hand up to the magical eye, “it keeps sticking — ever since that scum wore it —”

And with a nasty squelching sound much like a plunger being pulled from a sink, he popped out his eye.

“Mad-Eye, you do know that’s disgusting, don’t you?” said Tonks conversationally.

“Get me a glass of water, would you, Harry?” asked Moody.

Harry crossed to the dishwasher, took out a clean glass, and filled

it with water at the sink, still watched eagerly by the band of wizards. Their relentless staring was starting to annoy him.

“Cheers,” said Moody, when Harry handed him the glass. He dropped the magical eyeball into the water and prodded it up and down; the eye whizzed around, staring at them all in turn. “I want three-hundred-and-sixty degrees visibility on the return journey.”

“How’re we getting — wherever we’re going?” Harry asked.

“Brooms,” said Lupin. “Only way. You’re too young to Apparate, they’ll be watching the Floo Network, and it’s more than our life’s worth to set up an unauthorized Portkey.”

“Remus says you’re a good flier,” said Kingsley Shacklebolt in his deep voice.

“He’s excellent,” said Lupin, who was checking his watch. “Anyway, you’d better go and get packed, Harry, we want to be ready to go when the signal comes.”

“I’ll come and help you,” said Tonks brightly.

She followed Harry back into the hall and up the stairs, looking around with much curiosity and interest.

“Funny place,” she said, “it’s a bit *too* clean, d’you know what I mean? Bit unnatural. Oh, this is better,” she added, as they entered Harry’s bedroom and he turned on the light.

His room was certainly much messier than the rest of the house. Confined to it for four days in a very bad mood, Harry had not bothered tidying up after himself. Most of the books he owned were strewn over the floor where he’d tried to distract himself with each in turn and thrown it aside. Hedwig’s cage needed cleaning out and was starting to smell, and his trunk lay open, revealing a jumbled

mixture of Muggle clothes and wizard's robes that had spilled onto the floor around it.

Harry started picking up books and throwing them hastily into his trunk. Tonks paused at his open wardrobe to look critically at her reflection in the mirror on the inside of the door.

"You know, I don't think purple's really my color," she said pensively, tugging at a lock of spiky hair. "D'you think it makes me look a bit peaky?"

"Er —" said Harry, looking up at her over the top of *Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland*.

"Yeah, it does," said Tonks decisively. She screwed up her eyes in a strained expression as though she were struggling to remember something. A second later, her hair had turned bubble-gum pink.

"How did you do that?" said Harry, gaping at her as she opened her eyes again.

"I'm a Metamorphmagus," she said, looking back at her reflection and turning her head so that she could see her hair from all directions. "It means I can change my appearance at will," she added, spotting Harry's puzzled expression in the mirror behind her. "I was born one. I got top marks in Concealment and Disguise during Auror training without any study at all, it was great."

"You're an Auror?" said Harry, impressed. Being a Dark wizard catcher was the only career he'd ever considered after Hogwarts.

"Yeah," said Tonks, looking proud. "Kingsley is as well; he's a bit higher up than I am, though. I only qualified a year ago. Nearly failed on Stealth and Tracking, I'm dead clumsy, did you hear me break that plate when we arrived downstairs?"

“Can you learn how to be a Metamorphmagus?” Harry asked her, straightening up, completely forgetting about packing.

Tonks chuckled.

“Bet you wouldn’t mind hiding that scar sometimes, eh?”

Her eyes found the lightning-shaped scar on Harry’s forehead.

“No, I wouldn’t mind,” Harry mumbled, turning away. He did not like people staring at his scar.

“Well, you’ll have to learn the hard way, I’m afraid,” said Tonks. “Metamorphmagi are really rare, they’re born, not made. Most wizards need to use a wand or potions to change their appearance. . . . But we’ve got to get going, Harry, we’re supposed to be packing,” she added guiltily, looking around at all the mess on the floor.

“Oh — yeah,” said Harry, grabbing up a few more books.

“Don’t be stupid, it’ll be much quicker if I — *pack!*” cried Tonks, waving her wand in a long, sweeping movement over the floor.

Books, clothes, telescope, and scales all soared into the air and flew pell-mell into the trunk.

“It’s not very neat,” said Tonks, walking over to the trunk and looking down at the jumble inside. “My mum’s got this knack of getting stuff to fit itself in neatly — she even gets the socks to fold themselves — but I’ve never mastered how she does it — it’s a kind of flick —”

She flicked her wand hopefully; one of Harry’s socks gave a feeble sort of wiggle and flopped back on top of the mess within.

“Ah, well,” said Tonks, slamming the trunk’s lid shut, “at least it’s all in. That could do with a bit of cleaning, too — *Scourgify* —” She

pointed her wand at Hedwig's cage; a few feathers and droppings vanished. "Well, that's a *bit* better — I've never quite got the hang of these sort of householdy spells. Right — got everything? Cauldron? Broom? Wow! A *Firebolt*?"

Her eyes widened as they fell on the broomstick in Harry's right hand. It was his pride and joy, a gift from Sirius, an international standard broomstick.

"And I'm still riding a Comet Two Sixty," said Tonks enviously. "Ah well... wand still in your jeans? Both buttocks still on? Okay, let's go. *Locomotor Trunk*."

Harry's trunk rose a few inches into the air. Holding her wand like a conductor's baton, Tonks made it hover across the room and out of the door ahead of them, Hedwig's cage in her left hand. Harry followed her down the stairs carrying his broomstick.

Back in the kitchen, Moody had replaced his eye, which was spinning so fast after its cleaning it made Harry feel sick. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Sturgis Podmore were examining the microwave and Hestia Jones was laughing at a potato peeler she had come across while rummaging in the drawers. Lupin was sealing a letter addressed to the Dursleys.

"Excellent," said Lupin, looking up as Tonks and Harry entered. "We've got about a minute, I think. We should probably get out into the garden so we're ready. Harry, I've left a letter telling your aunt and uncle not to worry —"

"They won't," said Harry.

"That you're safe —"

"That'll just depress them."

“— and you’ll see them next summer.”

“Do I have to?”

Lupin smiled but made no answer.

“Come here, boy,” said Moody gruffly, beckoning Harry toward him with his wand. “I need to Disillusion you.”

“You need to what?” said Harry nervously.

“Disillusionment Charm,” said Moody, raising his wand. “Lupin says you’ve got an Invisibility Cloak, but it won’t stay on while we’re flying; this’ll disguise you better. Here you go —”

He rapped Harry hard on the top of the head and Harry felt a curious sensation as though Moody had just smashed an egg there; cold trickles seemed to be running down his body from the point the wand had struck.

“Nice one, Mad-Eye,” said Tonks appreciatively, staring at Harry’s midriff.

Harry looked down at his body, or rather, what had been his body, for it didn’t look anything like his anymore. It was not invisible; it had simply taken on the exact color and texture of the kitchen unit behind him. He seemed to have become a human chameleon.

“Come on,” said Moody, unlocking the back door with his wand.

They all stepped outside onto Uncle Vernon’s beautifully kept lawn.

“Clear night,” grunted Moody, his magical eye scanning the heavens. “Could’ve done with a bit more cloud cover. Right, you,” he barked at Harry, “we’re going to be flying in close formation. Tonks’ll be right in front of you, keep close on her tail. Lupin’ll be covering you from below. I’m going to be behind you. The rest’ll be

circling us. We don't break ranks for anything, got me? If one of us is killed —”

“Is that likely?” Harry asked apprehensively, but Moody ignored him.

“— the others keep flying, don't stop, don't break ranks. If they take out all of us and you survive, Harry, the rear guard are standing by to take over; keep flying east and they'll join you.”

“Stop being so cheerful, Mad-Eye, he'll think we're not taking this seriously,” said Tonks, as she strapped Harry's trunk and Hedwig's cage into a harness hanging from her broom.

“I'm just telling the boy the plan,” growled Moody. “Our job's to deliver him safely to headquarters and if we die in the attempt —”

“No one's going to die,” said Kingsley Shacklebolt in his deep, calming voice.

“Mount your brooms, that's the first signal!” said Lupin sharply, pointing into the sky.

Far, far above them, a shower of bright red sparks had flared among the stars. Harry recognized them at once as wand sparks. He swung his right leg over his Firebolt, gripped its handle tightly, and felt it vibrating very slightly, as though it was as keen as he was to be up in the air once more.

“Second signal, let's go!” said Lupin loudly, as more sparks, green this time, exploded high above them.

Harry kicked off hard from the ground. The cool night air rushed through his hair as the neat square gardens of Privet Drive fell away, shrinking rapidly into a patchwork of dark greens and blacks, and every thought of the Ministry hearing was swept from his mind as

though the rush of air had blown it out of his head. He felt as though his heart was going to explode with pleasure; he was flying again, flying away from Privet Drive as he'd been fantasizing about all summer; he was going home. . . . For a few glorious moments, all his problems seemed to recede into nothing, insignificant in the vast, starry sky.

"Hard left, hard left, there's a Muggle looking up!" shouted Moody from behind him. Tonks swerved and Harry followed her, watching his trunk swinging wildly beneath her broom. "We need more height. . . . Give it another quarter of a mile!"

Harry's eyes watered in the chill as they soared upward; he could see nothing below now but tiny pinpricks of light that were car headlights and streetlamps. Two of those tiny lights might belong to Uncle Vernon's car. . . . The Dursleys would be heading back to their empty house right now, full of rage about the nonexistent lawn competition. . . . and Harry laughed aloud at the thought, though his voice was drowned by the flapping of the others' robes, the creaking of the harness holding his trunk and the cage, the *whoosh* of the wind in their ears as they sped through the air. He had not felt this alive in a month, or this happy. . . .

"Bearing south!" shouted Mad-Eye. "Town ahead!"

They soared right, so that they did not pass directly over the glittering spiderweb of lights below.

"Bear southeast and keep climbing, there's some low cloud ahead we can lose ourselves in!" called Moody.

"We're not going through clouds!" shouted Tonks angrily. "We'll get soaked, Mad-Eye!"

Harry was relieved to hear her say this; his hands were growing numb on the Firebolt's handle. He wished he had thought to put on a coat; he was starting to shiver.

They altered their course every now and then according to Mad-Eye's instructions. Harry's eyes were screwed up against the rush of icy wind that was starting to make his ears ache. He could remember being this cold on a broom only once before, during the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff in his third year, which had taken place in a storm. The guard around him was circling continuously like giant birds of prey. Harry lost track of time. He wondered how long they had been flying; it felt like an hour at least.

"Turning southwest!" yelled Moody. "We want to avoid the motorway!"

Harry was now so chilled that he thought longingly for a moment of the snug, dry interiors of the cars streaming along below, then, even more longingly, of traveling by Floo powder; it might be uncomfortable to spin around in fireplaces but it was at least warm in the flames. . . . Kingsley Shacklebolt swooped around him, bald pate and earring gleaming slightly in the moonlight. . . . Now Emmeline Vance was on his right, her wand out, her head turning left and right . . . then she too swooped over him, to be replaced by Sturgis Podmore. . . .

"We ought to double back for a bit, just to make sure we're not being followed!" Moody shouted.

"ARE YOU MAD, MAD-EYE?" Tonks screamed from the front. "We're all frozen to our brooms! If we keep going off course we're not going to get there until next week! We're nearly there now!"

“Time to start the descent!” came Lupin’s voice. “Follow Tonks, Harry!”

Harry followed Tonks into a dive. They were heading for the largest collection of lights he had yet seen, a huge, sprawling, crisscrossing mass, glittering in lines and grids, interspersed with patches of deepest black. Lower and lower they flew, until Harry could see individual headlights and streetlamps, chimneys, and television aerials. He wanted to reach the ground very much, though he felt sure that someone would have to unfreeze him from his broom.

“Here we go!” called Tonks, and a few seconds later she had landed.

Harry touched down right behind her and dismounted on a patch of unkempt grass in the middle of a small square. Tonks was already unbuckling Harry’s trunk. Shivering, Harry looked around. The grimy fronts of the surrounding houses were not welcoming; some of them had broken windows, glimmering dully in the light from the streetlamps, paint was peeling from many of the doors, and heaps of rubbish lay outside several sets of front steps.

“Where are we?” Harry asked, but Lupin said quietly, “In a minute.”

Moody was rummaging in his cloak, his gnarled hands clumsy with cold.

“Got it,” he muttered, raising what looked like a silver cigarette lighter into the air and clicking it.

The nearest streetlamp went out with a pop. He clicked the unlighter again; the next lamp went out. He kept clicking until every lamp in the square was extinguished and the only light in the square

came from curtained windows and the sickle moon overhead.

“Borrowed it from Dumbledore,” growled Moody, pocketing the Put-Outer. “That’ll take care of any Muggles looking out of the window, see? Now, come on, quick.”

He took Harry by the arm and led him from the patch of grass, across the road, and onto the pavement. Lupin and Tonks followed, carrying Harry’s trunk between them, the rest of the guard, all with their wands out, flanking them.

The muffled pounding of a stereo was coming from an upper window in the nearest house. A pungent smell of rotting rubbish came from the pile of bulging bin-bags just inside the broken gate.

“Here,” Moody muttered, thrusting a piece of parchment toward Harry’s Disillusioned hand and holding his lit wand close to it, so as to illuminate the writing. “Read quickly and memorize.”

Harry looked down at the piece of paper. The narrow handwriting was vaguely familiar. It said:

The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.

Die voorhoede

Ek is so pas deur Dementors aangeval en word dalk uit Hogwarts geskors. Ek wil weet wat aangaan en wanneer ek van hier af mag padgee.

Die oomblik toe Harry in sy slaapkamer by sy lessenaar kom, skryf hy dié woorde op drie aparte velle perkament neer. Hy adresseer die eerste een aan Sirius, die tweede aan Ron en die derde aan Hermien. Sy uil, Hedwig, het gaan jag. Haar kou staan op sy lessenaar, maar dis leeg. Harry loop heen en weer terwyl hy vir haar wag. Sy brein is só besig dat hy nie kan slaap nie, hoewel sy oë jeuk en brand van uitputting. Sy rug pyn van Dudley se gewig wat hy huis toe moes sleep en die twee knoppe op sy kop waar die venster en Dudley hom getref het, klop pynlik.

Harry stap met gebalde vuiste en knersende tande op en af. Elke keer dat hy verby die venster loop, kyk hy vol ingehoue woede en frustrasie na die sterbesprinkelde hemel. Dementors is gestuur om hom dood te maak, tant Freya en Mundungus Fletcher het hom in die geheim gevolg, hys uit Hogwarts geskors en sy verhoor deur die Ministerie vir Towerkuns lê voor – en nog steeds sê niemand vir hom wat aangaan nie.

En waarom, *waarom* het daardie Skeller gegaan? Wie se stem het so aklig dreigend deur die kombuis weergalm?

Hoekom is hy nog steeds hier vasgekeer, sonder enige inligting? Hoekom behandel almal hom soos 'n stout kind? *Moenie weer toornie, bly in die huis* . . .

Hy skop sy skooltrommel in die verbyloop, maar dit laat hom nie beter voel nie. Inteendeel, hy voel erger, want behalwe die pyne in die res van sy liggaam is daar nou ook nog 'n skerp steekpyn in sy toon.

Net toe hy weer verby die venster hink, seil Hedwig met 'n sagte ritseling van vlerke soos 'n klein spokie daardeur.

“Hoog tyd!” snou Harry toe sy liggies bo-op haar kou land. “Jy kan dit maar los, ek het werk vir jou!”

Hedwig se groot, ronde, amber oë staar verwykend na hom bo die dooie padda in haar snawel.

"Kom hier," sê Harry. Hy tel die drie rolletjies perkament en 'n leë bandjie op en bind dit om haar growwe been. "Neem dit reguit na Sirius, Ron en Hermien. En moenie sonder behoorlike antwoorde terugkom nie. As jy moet, hou aan om hulle te pik tot hulle onontvanklike lang briewe geskryf het. Verstaan jy?"

Hedwig hoe-hoe gedemp, haar snawel nog steeds vol padda.

"Nou toe, weg is jy," sê Harry.

Hy vlieg onmiddellik en Harry val op sy bed neer sonder om eens uit te trek. Hy staar na die donker plafon. Behalwe al die ander mislike gevoelens, voel hy ook nog skuldig dat hy so lelik met Hedwig was. Sy is sy enigste vriend in Ligusterlaan 4. Hy sal met haar regmaak wanneer sy Sirius, Ron en Hermien se antwoorde bring.

Hulle sal beslis dadelik terugskryf. Hulle kan onmoontlik 'n aanval deur Dementors ignoreer. Hy sal waarskynlik môreoggend wakker word met drie vet briewe vol simpatie en planne vir sy onmiddellike verskuiwing na Die Konynenes. En met hierdie aangename gedagte rol die slaap oor hom en versmoor alle ander gedagtes.

Maar Hedwig kom nie die volgende oggend terug nie. Harry bring die hele dag in sy slaapkamer deur en gaan net uit badkamer toe. Drie keer deur die dag stoot tant Petunia vir hom kos deur die katflap wat oom Vernon drie somers gelede aangebring het. Elke keer dat Harry haar hoor aankom, probeer hy haar oor die Skeller uitvra, maar hy kan net sowel met die deurknop praat.

Andersins bly die Dursleys ver weg van sy kamer. Daar is geen sin in dat Harry sy geselskap aan hulle probeer opdring nie. Hy sal tog niks bereik as hulle nog 'n herrie opskop nie, behalwe om hom dalk só kwaad te maak dat hy weer onwettig toor.

So gaan dit vir drie volle dae. Harry is om die beurt só vol rustelose energie dat hy nie op iets kan konsentreer nie. Hy stap op en af in sy kamer, kwaad vir almal wat hom alleen in sy eie vet laat braai. Hy is so lusteloos dat hy 'n uur lank op sy bed kan lê en in die ruimte staar terwyl hy pyn van angste by die gedagte aan die verhoor by die Ministerie.

Wat as hulle uitspraak teen hom is? Wat as hy geskors en sy towerstaf in twee gebreek word? Wat sal hy doen, waarheen sal hy gaan? Hy kan nie terugkom en vir altyd by die Dursleys woon nie, nie nou dat hy van die ander wêreld weet nie, die een waaraan hy eintlik behoort. Sal hy in Sirius se huis mag gaan woon soos Sirius 'n jaar gelede voorgestel het, voor hy gedwing is om vir die Ministerie te vlug? Sal hy toegelaat word om alleen daar te bly, aangesien hy nog minderjarig is? Of sal die kwessie van waarheen hy

moet gaan nie sy besluit wees nie? Was sy oortreding van die Internasionale Statuut van Geheimhouding erg genoeg om hom in 'n sel in Azkaban te laat beland? Elke keer dat hy daaraan dink, glip Harry van sy bed af en begin weer loop.

Op die vierde nag ná Hedwig se vertrek lê Harry in een van sy onverskillige fases en staar na die plafon, sy moeë brein heeltemal leeg, toe sy oom sy kamer binnekom. Harry kyk stadig om na hom. Oom Vernon dra sy beste pak en lyk selfvoldaan.

“Ons gaan uit,” sê hy.

“Ekskuus?”

“Ons – dis te sê, jou tante, Dudley en ek – gaan uit.”

“Goed,” sê Harry stroef en kyk terug na die plafon.

“Jy mag nie uit jou kamer gaan terwyl ons weg is nie.”

“Oukei.”

“Jy raak nie aan die televisie, die stereo of enige van ons besittings nie.”

“Reg.”

“Jy mag nie kos uit die yskas steel nie.”

“Goed so.”

“Ek gaan jou deur sluit.”

“Maak so.”

Oom Vernon gluur na Harry, duidelik agterdogtig oor hierdie gebrek aan weerstand. Toe marsjeer hy uit die kamer en trek die deur agter hom toe. Harry hoor hoe die sleutel in die slot draai en oom Vernon se voetstappe op die trappe. 'n Paar minute later klap motordeure, 'n enjin tjommel en daar is die onmiskenbare geluid van 'n voertuig wat by die oprit uitry.

Harry gee werklik nie om dat die Dursleys uitgaan nie. Dit maak vir hom geen verskil of hulle by die huis is of nie. Hy kan nie eens die energie bymekaarskraap om op te staan en sy slaapkamerlig aan te skakel nie. Die kamer raak geleidelik donkerder terwyl hy langs die oop venster na die naggeluide lê en luister en wag op die wonderlike oomblik wanneer Hedwig terugkom.

Om hom kraak die leë huis. Die pype gorrel. Harry is half bedwelm en dink aan niks, die ene ellende.

Dan, baie duidelik, hoor hy 'n slag onder in die kombuis.

Hy sit kiertsregop en luister. Die Dursleys kan nie terug wees nie, dis heeltemal te gou, en in elk geval het hy nie hulle kar gehoor nie.

Vir 'n paar sekondes is dit stil, dan is daar stemme.

Inbrekers, dink hy en glip van die bed af – maar dan dring dit tot hom deur dat inbrekers sag sal praat, terwyl wie ook al in die kombuis is nie daardie moeite doen nie.

Hy raap sy towerstaf van die bedkassie af op en hou sy kamerdeur stip dop terwyl hy fyn luister. Hy skrik toe die slot skielik hard klik en sy deur oopswaai.

Harry staan doodstil en staar deur die oop kosyn na die donker trapportaal, sy ore gespits vir enige verdere geluide, maar daar is niks. Hy huiwer 'n oomblik en glip dan vinnig en stil uit sy kamer na die bopunt van die trappe.

Sy hart skiet tot bo in sy keel. Daar is mense onder in die skemer voorportaal. Hulle is afgeteken teen die lig wat van buite deur die glasdeur val. Dit lyk of daar agt of nege van hulle is en hulle kyk op na hom.

"Laat sak jou towerstaf, seun, voor jy iemand in die oog steek," grom 'n diep stem.

Harry se hart klop onbedaarlik. Hy ken daardie stem, maar hy laat nie sy towerstaf sak nie.

"Professor Moodie?" vra hy onseker.

"Ek weet nie so mooi van die 'professor' nie," grom die stem, "ek het nooit juis veel onderwys gegee nie, of hoe? Kom hier dat ons jou behoorlik kan sien."

Harry laat sak sy towerstaf effens, maar verslap nie sy greep nie. Hy beweeg ook nie. Hy is agterdogtig – en met goeie rede. Vir amper nege maande het hy gedink hy is in Maloog Moodie se geselskap, net om uit te vind dis glad nie Moodie nie, maar 'n bedrieër. Erger, 'n bedrieër wat hom probeer vermoor het voor hy ontmasker is. Maar terwyl hy probeer besluit wat om te doen, dryf 'n tweede stem na bo.

"Dis alles reg, Harry. Ons het jou kom haal."

Harry se hart bokspring. Hy ken daardie stem ook, hoewel hy dit meer as 'n jaar laas gehoor het.

"P-Professor Lupin?" sê hy ongelowig. "Is dit u?"

"Hoekom staan ons almal hier in die donker?" sê 'n derde stem. Dis 'n heeltemal onbekende vrouestem. "Lumos."

'n Towerstaf se punt flikker en verlig die portaal met towerlig. Harry knipper sy oë. Die mense drom aan die voet van die trap saam en staar nuuskierig op na hom. Party rek hul nekke om beter te kan sien.

Remus Lupin staan die naaste aan hom. Hoewel hy nog taamluk jonk is, lyk Lupin moeg en effens siek. Hy het meer grys hare as toe Harry hom gaan groet het en sy mantel is nog meer gelap en verflenter as voorheen. Tog glimlag hy breed vir Harry, wat ook probeer glimlag ten spyte van die skok.

"Ooo, hy lyk nes ek gedink het," sê die heks met die verligte

towerstaf in haar hand. Dit lyk of sy die jongste van almal is. Sy het 'n bleek hartvormige gesig, donker vonkelende oë en kort, stekelrige, skokpers hare. "Hallo, Harry!"

"Ja, ek sien wat jy bedoel, Remus," sê 'n swart pankoptowenaar wat heel agter staan – sy stem is diep en dralend en hy het 'n enkele goue ring in sy oor – "hy lyk op 'n haar soos James."

"Behalwe die oë," sê 'n towenaar met silwer hare van agter af. "Lily se oë."

Maloog Moodie het lang grys hare en dit lyk of daar 'n hap uit sy neus weg is. Hy gluur agterdogtig na Harry deur sy onpaar oë. Die een is klein, donker en kraalagtig, die ander groot, rond en elektries blou – die toweroog wat deur mure, deure en die agterkant van Moodie se eie kop kan sien.

"Is jy doodseker dis hy, Lupin?" grom hy. "Dit sal 'n lekker gemors wees as ons die een of ander Doodseter wat hom uitgee vir Harry Potter moet saamvat. Ons moet hom iets vra wat net dié regte Potter sal weet. Tensy iemand Veritaserum hier het?"

"Harry, watter gedaante neem jou Patronus aan?" vra Lupin.

"'n Takbok," sê Harry senuagtig.

"Dis hy, Maloog," sê Lupin.

Harry is baie bewus daarvan dat almal nog steeds na hom staar toe hy sy towerstaf in sy jeans se agtersak steek en met die trappe begin afstap.

"Moenie jou towerstaf daar sit nie, seun!" brul Moodie. "Wat as dit ontvlam? Beter towenaars as jy het al hul boude verloor, weet jy!"

"Wie ken jy wat 'n boud verloor het?" vra die heks met die pers hare vol belangstelling.

"Dit het niks met jou te doen nie, hou net jou towerstaf uit jou agtersak!" grom Maloog. "Elementêre towerstaf-veiligheidsmaatreël waaraan niemand hulle meer steur nie." Hy stap swaar na die kombuis. "En ek het dit gesien," voeg hy ergerlik by toe die heks haar oë na die plafon rol.

Lupin steek sy hand uit en skud Harry s'n.

"Hoe gaan dit?" vra hy en kyk stip na Harry.

"G-goed..."

Harry kan skaars glo dat dit werklik gebeur. Vier weke lank net niks, nie die geringste blykie van 'n plan om hom uit Ligusterlaan te verwyder nie, en skielik staan 'n hele klomp towenaars ewe rustig in die huis asof dit lank gelede al gereël is. Hy kyk na die mense om Lupin – hulle staar steeds gretig na hom. Hy voel baie bewus daarvan dat hy sy hare vier dae laas gekam het.

"Ek julle is gelukkig dat die Dursleys uit is." prewel hy.

"Gelukkig, ha!" sê die perskopvrou. "Dis ek wat hulle uitgelok het.

Het vir hulle 'n brief per Moggelpos gestuur dat hulle op die kortlys vir Engeland se Bes Versorgde Voorstedelike Grasperkkompetisie is. Hulle is op die oomblik op pad na die prysuitdeling of so dink hulle."

Harry het 'n vlietende visioen van oom Vernon se gesig as hy besef daar is nie 'n kompetisie vir Engeland se Bes Versorgde Voorstedelike Grasperk nie.

"Wus gaan vertrek, of hoe?" vra hy. "Binnekort?"

"Heilik dadelik," sê Lupin, "ons wag net vir tyding dat alles veilig is."

"Waarheen gaan ons? Die Konynenes?" vra Harry hoopvol.

"Nie Die Konynenes, nee," sê Lupin en stuur Harry na die kombuis. Die groepie towenaars volg hulle, almal kyk nog steeds nuuskierig na Harry. "Te gevaarlik. Ons het ons Hoofkwartier ingerig op 'n plek wat nie opgespoor kan word nie. Dit het 'n rukkie geneem."

Maloog Moodie gaan sit by die kombuistafel en sluk uit 'n heupfles. Hy bekyk die Dursleys se magdom arbeidsbesparende toestelle terwyl sy toweroog wild tol.

"Dit is Alastor Moodie, Harry," gaan Lupin voort en wys na Moodie.

"Ja, ek weet," sê Harry ongemaklik. Dit voel snaaks om aan iemand voorgestel te word wat hy gedink het hy reeds 'n jaar ken.

"En dit is Nymphadora –"

"Jy weet jy mag my nie Nymphadora noem nie, Remus," sê die jong heks met 'n siddering, "dis Tonks."

"Nymphadora Tonks, wat verkies om slegs haar van te gebruik," voltooi Lupin.

"Jy sou ook as jou sotlike ma jou *Nymphadora* gedoop het," brom Tonks.

"En dit is Kingsley Shacklebolt." Hy wys na die lang donker towenaar wat buig. "Elphias Doge." Die silwerharige towenaar knik. "Dedalus Diggel –"

"Ons het reeds voorheen ontmoet," piep Diggel opgewonde en laat sy pers keil val.

"Emmeline Vance." 'n Statige heks in 'n smaraggroen sjaal knik. "Sturgis Podmore." 'n Towenaar met 'n hoekige kakebeen en dik strooikleurige hare knipoog. "En Hestia Jansen." 'n Heks met pienk wange en swart hare lig haar hand waar sy langs die yskas staan.

Harry knik ongemaklik vir elkeen soos hulle voorgestel word. Hy wens hulle wil ophou om so na hom te kyk. Dis asof hy skielik

op 'n verhoog staan. Hy wonder ook hoekom daar so baie van hulle is.

"'n Verbasend groot getal mense het aangebied om jou te kom haal," sê Lupin asof hy Harry se gedagtes gelees het. Die hoeke van sy mond trek effens.

"Ja, wel, hoe meer siele, hoe meer vreugde," sê Moodie somber. "Ons is jou lyfwag, Potter."

"Ons wag vir die teken dat dit veilig is om te vertrek," sê Lupin en kyk deur die venster. "Ons het ongeveer vyftien minute."

"Baie skoon, hierdie Moggels, of hoe?" sê die heks wat Tonks genoem wil wees. Sy kyk vol belangstelling na die kombuis. "My pa is Moggel-gebore en hy's verskriklik slordig. Dit hang seker maar af, nes by towenaars?"

"Hm – ja," sê Harry. "Professor –" hy draai terug na Lupin, "wat gaan aan, ek het nog niks van iemand gehoor nie, wat is Wolde –?"

'n Paar van die hekse en towenaars maak harde sissgeluide. Dedalus Diggel laat val weer sy hoed en Moodie grom: "Hou jou snater!"

"Ekskuus?" sê Harry.

"Ons bespreek niks hier nie, dis te gevaarlik," sê Moodie en draai sy gewone oog na Harry. Sy toweroog staan nog steeds na die plafon. "Verbrands," voeg hy ergerlik by en steek sy hand na die toweroog uit; "dit haak aanmekaar vas vandat daardie gemors dit gedra het."

En met 'n nare slobbergeluid, baie soos 'n suigpomp in 'n opwasbak, dop hy sy oog uit.

"Maloog, jy weet hoe walglik dit is, nè?" sê Tonks gesellig.

"Gee vir my 'n glas water, asseblief, Harry," versoek Maloog.

Harry stap na die skottelgoedwasser, haal 'n skoon glas uit en tap dit by die wasbak vol water terwyl die spul towenaars hom nog steeds nuuskierig dophou. Die gestaar begin hom ergerlik maak.

"Gesondheid," sê Maloog toe Harry die glas vir hom gee. Hy laat val die toweroog in die water en dompel dit 'n paar keer onder. Die oog tol rond en staan om die beurt na elkeen van hulle. "Ek moet driehonderd-en-sestig grade visie vir die terugreis hê."

"Hoe gaan ons – waarheen ons ook al gaan?" vra Harry.

"Besems," sê Lupin, "dis die enigste manier. Jy's te jonk om te appareer en hulle sal die Floo-netwerk dophou. En dis nie die moeite werd om 'n ongemagtigde poortsleutel op te stel nie."

"Remus sê jy vlieg goed," sê Kingsley Shacklebolt in sy diep stem.

"Hy's uitstekend," sê Lupin, wat sy horlosie dophou. "In elk geval, jy moet gaan inpak, Harry, ons moet gereed wees om te vertrek sodra die teken kom."

"Ek sal jou help," sê Tonks.

Sy volg Harry deur die voorportaal en op met die trappe terwyl sy nuuskierig rondkyk.

"Snaakse plek," sê sy. "Dis 'n bietjie te skoon, as jy weet wat ek bedoel. Effens onnatuurlik. A, dis beter," voeg sy by toe hulle by Harry se kamer ingaan en hy die lig aanskakel.

Sy kamer is beslis heelwat slordiger as die res van die huis. Vasgekluiser vir vier dae, in 'n baie slegte bui, het Harry nie die moeite gedoen om sy kamer aan die kant te hou nie. Die meeste van sy boeke lê gesaai oor die vloer soos hy probeer het om hom daarmee besig te hou, net om elkeen ná 'n rukkie neer te smyt. Hedwig se hok moet skoongemaak word en ruik al, en sy trommel staan oop. 'n Deurmekaarspul Moggelklere en towenaarsmantels lê gestrooi oor die vloer.

Harry begin sy boeke optel en gooi dit haastig in sy trommel. Tonks het voor sy oop kasdeur gaan staan en kyk krities na haar weerkaatsing in die spieël aan die binnekant van die deur.

"Weet jy, ek dink nie pers is regtig my kleur nie," sê sy peinsend en trek aan 'n klossie hare. "Dink jy ook dit laat my effens siek lyk?"

"Hm –" sê Harry en kyk op na haar oor *Kwiddiek, Britse en Ierse spanne* in sy hand.

"Ja, tog," sê Tonks beslis. Sy trek haar oë oordrewe op skrefies, asof sy sukkel om iets te onthou. 'n Oomblik later is haar hare borrelgompientk.

"Hoet jy dit gedoen?" sê Harry toe haar oë weer oop is. Hy gaap na haar aan.

"Ek is 'n Metamorfmagus." Sy bekijk weer haar weerkaatsing in die spieël en draai haar kop om haar hare van alle kante te sien. "Dit beteken ek kan my voorkoms na willekeur verander," voeg sy by toe sy Harry se verwarde uitdrukking in die spieël sien. "Ek is so gebore. Tydens my opleiding as Auror het ek volpunte vir Verbergings en Vermomming gekry sonder om eens daarvoor te leer. Dit was wonderlik."

"Jy's 'n Auror?" sê Harry beïndruk. Om Donkertowenaars te vang, is die enigste loopbaan wat hy nog ooit oorweeg het ná Hogwarts.

"Ja," sê Tonks en sy lyk trots. "Kingsley is ook een. Hoewel hy 'n bietjie hoër op is as ek. Ek het eers 'n jaar gelede gekwalifiseer. Ek het amper Sluip en Opspoor gepluk. Ek is baie lomp, het jy daardie bord met ons aankoms hier hoor breek?"

"Kan 'n mens leer om 'n Metamorfmagus te word?" vra Harry. Hy kom orent en vergeet heeltemal om in te pak.

Tonks giggel.

"Ek wed jy sal nie omgee om daardie litteken soms weg te steek nie, nè?" sê sy met haar oë op die litteken in die vorm van 'n weerligstraal op Harry se voorkop.

"Nee, ek sal nie omgee nie," prewel Harry en draai weg. Hy hou nie daarvan as mense na sy litteken staar nie.

"Wel, ek's bevrees jy sal dit op die harde manier moet leer," sê Tonks. "Metamorfmagusse is baie skaars, hulle word gebore, nie gemaak nie. Die meeste towenaars gebruik 'n towerstaf of towerdrankies om hulle voorkoms te verander. Maar ons moet wikkell. Harry, ons is veronderstel om in te pak," sê sy skuldig terwyl sy na die deurmekaarspul om hulle kyk.

"O – ja," sê Harry en gryp na 'n paar boeke.

"Moenie simpel wees nie, dit sal baie vinniger wees as ek – pak!" skree Tonks en swaai haar towerstaf in 'n lang swiepende beweging oor die vloer.

Boeke, klere, teleskoop en skaal seil deur die lug en tuimel holderstebolder in die trommel.

"Dis nie baie netjies nie." Tonks stap na die trommel en kyk na die deurmekaarspul daar binne. "My ma het die manier om alles vreeslik netjies in te pas – sy kry dit selfs reg dat die sokkies hulself opvou – maar ek het die kuns nog nooit bemeester nie – dis 'n sekere soort swaai –" Sy swaai haar towerstaf hoopvol.

Een van Harry se sokkies sidder effens en val terug op die wanorde in die trommel.

"Ag, nou ja," sê Tonks en slaan die trommel se deksel toe, "ten minste is alles in." Sy rig haar towerstaf op Hedwig se kou. "Dit kan doen met 'n bietjie skoonmaak – *reinig*." 'n Paar vere en stukkies mis verdwyn. "Wel, dis darem 'n *bietjie* beter – ek kon nog nooit hierdie huishoudelike soort towerspreuke lekker regkry nie. Goed, het ons alles? Hekseketel? Besem? Sjoe – 'n *Vuurslag*?"

Haar oë rek toe sy die besemstok in Harry se hand sien. Dis Harry se kosbaarste besitting, sy besemstok van internasionale standaard wat Sirius vir hom present gegee het.

"En ek ry nog steeds 'n Komeet Twee Sestig," sê Tonks afgunstig. "Ag, nou ja... towerstaf nog in jou jeans? Albei boude nog daar? Oukei, kom ons gaan. *Lokomotor trommel*."

Harry se trommel styg 'n entjie in die lug op. Tonks hou haar towerstaf soos 'n dirigeerstokkie voor haar en met Hedwig se kou in haar hand laat sweef sy die trommel deur die vertrek en uit by die deur. Harry volg haar na onder met sy besemstok in sy hand.

Terug in die kombuis het Moodie sy regteroog teruggesit. Dit tol

so vinnig noudat dit skoon is dat Harry naer voel as hy daarna kyk. Kingsley Shacklebolt en Sturgis Podmore bestudeer die mikrogolf-oonid en Hestia Jansen lag vir 'n aartappelskiller wat sy in een van die laaie gekry het. Lupin is besig om 'n brief wat aan die Dursleys geadresseer is, toe te plak.

Hy kyk op toe Tonks en Harry binnekom. "Uitstekend. Ek dink ons het omtrent 'n minuut oor. Ons moet waarskynlik na die tuin gaan sodat ons gereed kan wees. Harry, ek het 'n brief vir jou oom en tante gelos om te sê hulle moenie bekommerd wees –"

"Hulle sal nie," sê Harry.

"– oor jou veiligheid nie –"

"Dit sal hulle net neerslagtig maak."

"– en dat jy hulle volgende somer sal sien."

"Moet ek?"

Lupin glimlag, maar antwoord nie.

"Kom hier, seun," sê Moodie skor en wink Harry met sy towerstaf nader. "Ek moet jou Ontgogel."

"Jy moet wát doen?" vra Harry benoud.

"Die Ontgogelingstowerspreuk," sê Moodie en lig sy towerstaf. "Lupin sê jy't 'n onsigbaarheidsmantel, maar dit sal afwaai wanneer ons vlieg. Hierdie sal jou beter vernom. Daarso –"

Hy tik hom hard op die kop en Harry voel hoe 'n vreemde sensasie deur hom vloei, asof Moodie so pas 'n eier op sy kop gebreek het. Dis of koue rillings van die plek waar die towerstaf aan hom geraak het deur sy lyf hardloop.

"Knap gedaan, Maloog," sê Tonks waarderend en staar na Harry se middel.

Harry kyk na sy eie liggaam, of eerder, na waar sy liggaam was, want dit lyk glad nie meer soos syne nie. Dis nie onsigbaar nie, dit het die presiese kleur en tekstuur van die kombuiskassie agter hom aangeneem. Hy het 'n soort menslike verkleurmanneltjie geword.

"Komaan," sê Moodie en sluit die agterdeur met sy towerstaf oop. Hulle stap uit op oom Vernon se pragtig versorgde grasperk.

"Helder nag," knor Moodie en sy toweroog speel oor die hemel. "Kan doen met 'n bietjie meer wolke. Luister, jy," blaf hy vir Harry, "ons vlieg naby mekaar. Tonks gaan reg voor jou wees, hou na aan haar stert. Lupin gaan jou van onder dek. Ek is reg agter jou. Die res gaan om ons sirkel. Ons breek nooit die formasie nie, verstaan julle? As een van ons getref word –"

"Kan dit gebeur?" vra Harry bekommerd, maar Moodie ignoreer hom.

“– hou die ander aan met vlieg, moenie stop nie, moenie die formasie breek nie. As hulle ons almal vernietig en jy oorleef, Harry, is die agterhoede gereed om oor te neem. Vlieg net oos en hulle sal by jou aansluit.”

“Jy’s heeltemal te lighartig, Moodie, hy sal dink ons neem dit nie ernstig op nie,” sê Tonks terwyl sy Harry se trommel en Hedwig se kou in ’n harnas vasmaak wat aan haar besem hang.

“Ek vertel net vir die seun wat ons plan is,” grom Moodie. “Dis ons werk om hom veilig by Hoofkwartier te kry en as ons onderweg sou doodgaan –”

“Niemand sal doodgaan nie,” sê Kingsley Shacklebolt in sy diep, bedaarde stem.

“Klim op jul besems, daar’s die eerste teken!” sê Lupin skerp en wys in die lug.

Ver, ver bo hulle flikker ’n vlag helderrooi vonke tussen die sterre. Harry herken dit dadelik as towerstafvonke. Hy swaai sy regterbeen oor sy Vuurslag, gryp die handvatsel styf vas en voel hoe dit effens vibreer asof dit net so gretig soos hy is om weer in die lug te wees.

“Tweede teken, weg is ons!” sê Lupin hard toe nog vonke, hierdie keer groen, bo hulle ontplof.

Harry skop hard van die grond weg. Die koel naglug warrel deur sy hare terwyl die netjiese vierkantige tuine van Ligusterlaan wegval en vinnig krimp tot ’n lapwerk van donkergroen en swart.

Dis of die windjie elke gedagte aan die Ministerie se verhoor uit sy kop blaas. Dit voel of sy hart gaan bars van plesier. Hy vlieg weer, vlieg weg van Ligusterlaan, soos hy nog die hele somer droom, hy gaan huis toe . . . vir ’n paar wonderlike oomblikke voel dit of al sy probleme tot niks vervaag, onbeduidend teen die enorme sterrehemel.

“Skerp links, skerp links, daar’s ’n Moggel wat opkyk!” skree Moodie agter hom. Tonks swenk, Harry volg haar en sien hoe sy trommel wild onder haar besem swaai. “Ons moet meer hoogte hê . . . gee dit nog vyfhonderd meter!”

Harry se oë traan teen die koue toe hulle boontoe swiep. Hy kan nou niks onder hom sien nie, behalwe klein speldekoppies lig wat motors se hoofligte en straatlampe is. Twee van daardie klein liggies kan oom Vernon se motor wees . . . Die Dursleys is nou seker op pad terug na hul leë huis, briesend kwaad oor die Grasperk-kompetisie wat toe al die tyd nie bestaan nie. Harry lag hardop by die gedagte, maar sy stem word verdoof deur die flappende mantels, die geknars van die harnas waarin sy trommel en kou is en die

storing van die wind in sy ore soos hulle deur die lug spoed. Hierdie hele maand het hy nie een keer so vol lewe of so gelukkig gevoel nie.

"Draai suid!" skree Maloog. "Dorp voor!"

Hulle seil na regs om nie oor die verligte spinnerakligte daar onder te vlieg nie.

"Gaan suidoos en hou aan styg, daar's lae wolke voor waarin ons kan skuil!" roep Moodie.

"Ons gaan g'n deur wolke nie!" skree Tonks vererg. "Ons sal sop-nat wees, Maloog!"

Harry is verlig dat sy dit sê; sy hande op die Vuurslag se handvatsel is feitlik dood van die koue. Hy wens hy het daaraan gedink om 'n jas aan te trek; hy het begin bewe.

Hulle verander elke nou en dan van koers volgens Maloog se instruksies. Harry se oë is op skrefies teen die aanstormende wind, wat so koud is dat sy ore daarvan pyn. Hy onthou die vorige keer toe dit so koud op 'n besem was: tydens die Kwiddiekwedstryd teen Hoosenproes in sy derde jaar toe 'n storm gewoed het. Die wagte sirkel die hele tyd soos reuseroofvoëls om Harry. Hy verloor tred met die tyd. Hy wonder hoe lank hulle al vlieg, dit voel al minstens vyf of ses uur.

"Draai suidwes!" skree Maloog. "Ons moet die snelweg vermy!"

Harry is nou so koud dat hy verlangend dink aan dié snoesige droë binnekante van die motors wat onder hulle verbystroom. Dan, met nog meer verlange, dink hy aan Floo-poeier. Dis wel effens ongemaklik om in 'n vuurmaakplek rond te tol, maar die vlamme is ten minste warm.

Kingsley Shacklebolt swiep om hom, sy kaalkop en ooring glinster effens in die maanlig. nou is Emmeline Vance aan sy regterkant, haar towerstaf gereed, haar kop draai na links en regs. dan swiep sy oor hom en word deur Murgis Podmore vervang.

"Ons moet teruggaan op ons spoor, net om seker te maak ons word nie agtervolg nie!" skree Moodie.

"IS JY MAL, MALOOG?" skree Tonks van voor af. "Ons is almal vasgeevries aan ons besems! As ons aanhou om van koers te verander, kom ons eers volgende week daar aan! In elk geval, ons is alper daar!"

"Maak gereed om te sak!" kom Lupin se stem. "Volg vir Tonks, Harry!"

Harry volg vir Tonks in 'n duikslag. Hulle stuur af op die grootste versameling ligte wat hy nog gesien het, 'n enorme, uitgebreide, kriskras massa glinsterende lyne en strepe, deurspek met pikswart vlekke. Laer en laer sak hulle tot Harry elke individuele hooflig en

straatlamp, skoorsteen en televisie-antenna kan sien. Hy kan nie wag om te land nie, maar iemand sal hom van sy besem moet ontvries.

"Hier gaan ons!" roep Tonks en 'n paar sekondes later land sy.

Harry vat net agter haar grond en klim stywebeen af op 'n lap onversorgde gras in die middel van 'n klein vierkant. Tonks is reeds besig om Harry se trommel los te maak. Hy kyk bewend om hom rond. Die vuil voorkante van die huise om hom laat hom nie juis welkom voel nie. Party het gebreekte vensters wat dof in die straatlampe se lig gloei, die deure se verf is afgedop en hope rommel lê buite etlike stelle voorste treetjies.

"Waar is ons?" vra Harry, maar Lupin sê saggies: "Nou-nou."

Moodie vroetel in sy kleed rond, sy knobbelrige hande lomp van die koue.

"Het dit," prewel hy en lig iets op wat soos 'n silwer sigaret-aansteker lyk.

Dit klik en die naaste straatlamp gaan met 'n plofgeluid uit. Hy klik die Uitklikker weer en die volgende straatlamp gaan uit. Hy hou aan klik tot al die lampe in die blok uit is. Nou kom die enigste lig van agter die gordyne voor een van die vensters en van die sekelmaan bo hul koppe.

"By Dompeldorius geleen," grom Moodie en steek die Uitklikker in sy sak. "Dit sal alle Moggels wat deur vensters kyk, fnuik. Nou toe, kom."

Hy neem Harry se arm en lei hom van die lap gras oor die pad na die sypaadjie. Lupin en Tonks volg met Harry se bagasie. Die res van die wagte, wat almal hul towerstawwe gereed hou, stap aan weerskante.

Die gedempte geluid van 'n stereo kom deur die venster van die naaste huis. 'n Sterk reuk van vrot vullis hang om 'n stapel bultende vullissakke net binne die stukkende hek.

"Hier," mompel Moodie en druk 'n stuk perkament in Harry se Ontgogelde hand. Hy hou sy verligte towerstaf naby sodat Harry die woorde kan sien. "Lees gou en memoriseer."

Harry kyk na die stuk papier. Die fyn handskrif is vaagweg bekend. Hy lees:

Die Hoofkwartier van die Orde van die Feniks kan gevind word by Grimmauldplein 12, Londen.

CHAPTER FOUR



NUMBER TWELVE, GRIMMAULD PLACE

What's the Order of the — ?" Harry began.

"Not here, boy!" snarled Moody. "Wait till we're inside!"

He pulled the piece of parchment out of Harry's hand and set fire to it with his wand-tip. As the message curled into flames and floated to the ground, Harry looked around at the houses again. They were standing outside number eleven; he looked to the left and saw number ten; to the right, however, was number thirteen.

"But where's — ?"

"Think about what you've just memorized," said Lupin quietly.

Harry thought, and no sooner had he reached the part about number twelve, Grimmauld Place, than a battered door emerged out of nowhere between numbers eleven and thirteen, followed swiftly by

dirty walls and grimy windows. It was as though an extra house had inflated, pushing those on either side out of its way. Harry gaped at it. The stereo in number eleven thudded on. Apparently the Muggles inside hadn't even felt anything.

"Come on, hurry," growled Moody, prodding Harry in the back.

Harry walked up the worn stone steps, staring at the newly materialized door. Its black paint was shabby and scratched. The silver door knocker was in the form of a twisted serpent. There was no keyhole or letterbox.

Lupin pulled out his wand and tapped the door once. Harry heard many loud, metallic clicks and what sounded like the clatter of a chain. The door creaked open.

"Get in quick, Harry," Lupin whispered. "But don't go far inside and don't touch anything."

Harry stepped over the threshold into the almost total darkness of the hall. He could smell damp, dust, and a sweetish, rotting smell; the place had the feeling of a derelict building. He looked over his shoulder and saw the others filing in behind him, Lupin and Tonks carrying his trunk and Hedwig's cage. Moody was standing on the top step and releasing the balls of light the Put-Outer had stolen from the streetlamps; they flew back to their bulbs and the square beyond glowed momentarily with orange light before Moody limped inside and closed the front door, so that the darkness in the hall became complete.

"Here —"

He rapped Harry hard over the head with his wand; Harry felt as though something hot was trickling down his back this time and knew

that the Disillusionment Charm must have lifted.

“Now stay still, everyone, while I give us a bit of light in here,” Moody whispered.

The others’ hushed voices were giving Harry an odd feeling of foreboding; it was as though they had just entered the house of a dying person. He heard a soft hissing noise and then old-fashioned gas lamps sputtered into life all along the walls, casting a flickering insubstantial light over the peeling wallpaper and threadbare carpet of a long, gloomy hallway, where a cobwebby chandelier glimmered overhead and age-blackened portraits hung crooked on the walls. Harry heard something scuttling behind the baseboard. Both the chandelier and the candelabra on a rickety table nearby were shaped like serpents.

There were hurried footsteps and Ron’s mother, Mrs. Weasley, emerged from a door at the far end of the hall. She was beaming in welcome as she hurried toward them, though Harry noticed that she was rather thinner and paler than she had been last time he had seen her.

“Oh, Harry, it’s lovely to see you!” she whispered, pulling him into a rib-cracking hug before holding him at arm’s length and examining him critically. “You’re looking peaky; you need feeding up, but you’ll have to wait a bit for dinner, I’m afraid . . .”

She turned to the gang of wizards behind him and whispered urgently, “He’s just arrived, the meeting’s started . . .”

The wizards behind Harry all made noises of interest and excitement and began filing past Harry toward the door through which Mrs. Weasley had just come; Harry made to follow Lupin, but

Mrs. Weasley held him back.

“No, Harry, the meeting’s only for members of the Order. Ron and Hermione are upstairs, you can wait with them until the meeting’s over and then we’ll have dinner. And keep your voice down in the hall,” she added in an urgent whisper.

“Why?”

“I don’t want to wake anything up.”

“What d’you — ?”

“I’ll explain later, I’ve got to hurry, I’m supposed to be at the meeting — I’ll just show you where you’re sleeping.”

Pressing her finger to her lips, she led him on tiptoes past a pair of long, moth-eaten curtains, behind which Harry supposed there must be another door, and after skirting a large umbrella stand that looked as though it had been made from a severed troll’s leg, they started up the dark staircase, passing a row of shrunken heads mounted on plaques on the wall. A closer look showed Harry that the heads belonged to house-elves. All of them had the same rather snoutlike nose.

Harry’s bewilderment deepened with every step he took. What on earth were they doing in a house that looked as though it belonged to the Darkest of wizards?

“Mrs. Weasley, why — ?”

“Ron and Hermione will explain everything, dear, I’ve really got to dash,” Mrs. Weasley whispered distractedly. “There” — they had reached the second landing — “you’re the door on the right. I’ll call you when it’s over.”

And she hurried off downstairs again.

Harry crossed the dingy landing, turned the bedroom doorknob, which was shaped like a serpent's head, and opened the door.

He caught a brief glimpse of a gloomy high-ceilinged, twin-bedded room, then there was a loud twittering noise, followed by an even louder shriek, and his vision was completely obscured by a large quantity of very bushy hair — Hermione had thrown herself onto him in a hug that nearly knocked him flat, while Ron's tiny owl, Pigwidgeon, zoomed excitedly round and round their heads.

“HARRY! Ron, he's here, Harry's here! We didn't hear you arrive! Oh, how *are* you? Are you all right? Have you been furious with us? I bet you have, I know our letters were useless — but we couldn't tell you anything, Dumbledore made us swear we wouldn't, oh, we've got so much to tell you, and you've got to tell us — the dementors! When we heard — and that Ministry hearing — it's just outrageous, I've looked it all up, they can't expel you, they just can't, there's provision in the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Sorcery for the use of magic in life-threatening situations —”

“Let him breathe, Hermione,” said Ron, grinning, closing the door behind Harry. He seemed to have grown several more inches during their month apart, making him taller and more gangly looking than ever, though the long nose, bright red hair, and freckles were the same.

Hermione, still beaming, let go of Harry, but before she could say another word there was a soft whooshing sound and something white soared from the top of a dark wardrobe and landed gently on Harry's shoulder.

“Hedwig!”

The snowy owl clicked her beak and nibbled his ear affectionately as Harry stroked her feathers.

“She’s been in a right state,” said Ron. “Pecked us half to death when she brought your last letters, look at this —”

He showed Harry the index finger of his right hand, which sported a half-healed but clearly deep cut.

“Oh yeah,” Harry said. “Sorry about that, but I wanted answers, you know . . .”

“We wanted to give them to you, mate,” said Ron. “Hermione was going spare, she kept saying you’d do something stupid if you were stuck all on your own without news, but Dumbledore made us —”

“— swear not to tell me,” said Harry. “Yeah, Hermione’s already said.”

The warm glow that had flared inside him at the sight of his two best friends was extinguished as something icy flooded the pit of his stomach. All of a sudden — after yearning to see them for a solid month — he felt he would rather Ron and Hermione left him alone.

There was a strained silence in which Harry stroked Hedwig automatically, not looking at either of the others.

“He seemed to think it was best,” said Hermione rather breathlessly. “Dumbledore, I mean.”

“Right,” said Harry. He noticed that her hands too bore the marks of Hedwig’s beak and found that he was not at all sorry.

“I think he thought you were safest with the Muggles —” Ron began.

“Yeah?” said Harry, raising his eyebrows. “Have either of you been attacked by dementors this summer?”

“Well, no — but that’s why he’s had people from the Order of the Phoenix tailing you all the time —”

Harry felt a great jolt in his guts as though he had just missed a step going downstairs. So everyone had known he was being followed except him.

“Didn’t work that well, though, did it?” said Harry, doing his utmost to keep his voice even. “Had to look after myself after all, didn’t I?”

“He was so angry,” said Hermione in an almost awestruck voice. “Dumbledore. We saw him. When he found out Mundungus had left before his shift had ended. He was scary.”

“Well, I’m glad he left,” Harry said coldly. “If he hadn’t, I wouldn’t have done magic and Dumbledore would probably have left me at Privet Drive all summer.”

“Aren’t you . . . aren’t you worried about the Ministry of Magic hearing?” said Hermione quietly.

“No,” Harry lied defiantly. He walked away from them, looking around, with Hedwig nestled contentedly on his shoulder, but this room was not likely to raise his spirits. It was dank and dark. A blank stretch of canvas in an ornate picture frame was all that relieved the bareness of the peeling walls and as Harry passed it he thought he heard someone lurking out of sight snigger.

“So why’s Dumbledore been so keen to keep me in the dark?” Harry asked, still trying hard to keep his voice casual. “Did you — er — bother to ask him at all?”

He glanced up just in time to see them exchanging a look that told him he was behaving just as they had feared he would. It did nothing

to improve his temper.

“We told Dumbledore we wanted to tell you what was going on,” said Ron. “We did, mate. But he’s really busy now, we’ve only seen him twice since we came here and he didn’t have much time, he just made us swear not to tell you important stuff when we wrote, he said the owls might be intercepted —”

“He could still’ve kept me informed if he’d wanted to,” Harry said shortly. “You’re not telling me he doesn’t know ways to send messages without owls.”

Hermione glanced at Ron and then said, “I thought that too. But he didn’t want you to know *anything*.”

“Maybe he thinks I can’t be trusted,” said Harry, watching their expressions.

“Don’t be thick,” said Ron, looking highly disconcerted.

“Or that I can’t take care of myself —”

“Of course he doesn’t think that!” said Hermione anxiously.

“So how come I have to stay at the Dursleys’ while you two get to join in everything that’s going on here?” said Harry, the words tumbling over one another in a rush, his voice growing louder with every word. “How come you two are allowed to know everything that’s going on — ?”

“We’re not!” Ron interrupted. “Mum won’t let us near the meetings, she says we’re too young —”

But before he knew it, Harry was shouting.

“SO YOU HAVEN’T BEEN IN THE MEETINGS, BIG DEAL! YOU’VE STILL BEEN HERE, HAVEN’T YOU? YOU’VE STILL BEEN TOGETHER! ME, I’VE BEEN STUCK AT THE

DURSLEYS' FOR A MONTH! AND I'VE HANDLED MORE THAN YOU TWO'VE EVER MANAGED AND DUMBLEDORE KNOWS IT — WHO SAVED THE SORCERER'S STONE? WHO GOT RID OF RIDDLE? WHO SAVED BOTH YOUR SKINS FROM THE DEMENTORS?"

Every bitter and resentful thought that Harry had had in the past month was pouring out of him; his frustration at the lack of news, the hurt that they had all been together without him, his fury at being followed and not told about it: All the feelings he was half-ashamed of finally burst their boundaries. Hedwig took fright at the noise and soared off on top of the wardrobe again; Pigwidgeon twittered in alarm and zoomed even faster around their heads.

"WHO HAD TO GET PAST DRAGONS AND SPHINXES AND EVERY OTHER FOUL THING LAST YEAR? WHO SAW HIM COME BACK? WHO HAD TO ESCAPE FROM HIM? ME!"

Ron was standing there with his mouth half-open, clearly stunned and at a loss for anything to say, while Hermione looked on the verge of tears.

"BUT WHY SHOULD I KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON? WHY SHOULD ANYONE BOTHER TO TELL ME WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING?"

"Harry, we wanted to tell you, we really did —" Hermione began.

"CAN'T'VE WANTED TO THAT MUCH, CAN YOU, OR YOU'D HAVE SENT ME AN OWL, BUT *DUMBLEDORE MADE YOU SWEAR* —"

"Well, he did —"

"FOUR WEEKS I'VE BEEN STUCK IN PRIVET DRIVE,

NICKING PAPERS OUT OF BINS TO TRY AND FIND OUT WHAT'S BEEN GOING ON —”

“We wanted to —”

“I SUPPOSE YOU'VE BEEN HAVING A REAL LAUGH, HAVEN'T YOU, ALL HOLED UP HERE TOGETHER —”

“No, honest —”

“Harry, we're really sorry!” said Hermione desperately, her eyes now sparkling with tears. “You're absolutely right, Harry — I'd be furious if it was me!”

Harry glared at her, still breathing deeply, then turned away from them again, pacing up and down. Hedwig hooted glumly from the top of the wardrobe. There was a long pause, broken only by the mournful creak of the floorboards below Harry's feet.

“What *is* this place anyway?” he shot at Ron and Hermione.

“Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix,” said Ron at once.

“Is anyone going to bother telling me what the Order of the Phoenix — ?”

“It's a secret society,” said Hermione quickly. “Dumbledore's in charge, he founded it. It's the people who fought against You-Know-Who last time.”

“Who's in it?” said Harry, coming to a halt with his hands in his pockets.

“Quite a few people —”

“— we've met about twenty of them,” said Ron, “but we think there are more . . .”

Harry glared at them.

"Well?" he demanded, looking from one to the other.

"Er," said Ron. "Well what?"

"*Voldemort!*" said Harry furiously, and both Ron and Hermione winced. "What's happening? What's he up to? Where is he? What are we doing to stop him?"

"We've *told* you, the Order don't let us in on their meetings," said Hermione nervously. "So we don't know the details — but we've got a general idea —" she added hastily, seeing the look on Harry's face.

"Fred and George have invented Extendable Ears, see," said Ron. "They're really useful."

"Extendable — ?"

"Ears, yeah. Only we've had to stop using them lately because Mum found out and went berserk. Fred and George had to hide them all to stop Mum binning them. But we got a good bit of use out of them before Mum realized what was going on. We know some of the Order are following known Death Eaters, keeping tabs on them, you know —"

"— some of them are working on recruiting more people to the Order —" said Hermione.

"— and some of them are standing guard over something," said Ron. "They're always talking about guard duty."

"Couldn't have been me, could it?" said Harry sarcastically.

"Oh yeah," said Ron, with a look of dawning comprehension.

Harry snorted. He walked around the room again, looking anywhere but at Ron and Hermione. "So what have you two been doing, if you're not allowed in meetings?" he demanded. "You said you'd been busy."

“We have,” said Hermione quickly. “We’ve been decontaminating this house, it’s been empty for ages and stuff’s been breeding in here. We’ve managed to clean out the kitchen, most of the bedrooms, and I think we’re doing the drawing room tomo — AARGH!”

With two loud cracks, Fred and George, Ron’s elder twin brothers, had materialized out of thin air in the middle of the room. Pigwidgeon twittered more wildly than ever and zoomed off to join Hedwig on top of the wardrobe.

“Stop *doing* that!” Hermione said weakly to the twins, who were as vividly red-haired as Ron, though stockier and slightly shorter.

“Hello, Harry,” said George, beaming at him. “We thought we heard your dulcet tones.”

“You don’t want to bottle up your anger like that, Harry, let it all out,” said Fred, also beaming. “There might be a couple of people fifty miles away who didn’t hear you.”

“You two passed your Apparation tests, then?” asked Harry grumpily.

“With distinction,” said Fred, who was holding what looked like a piece of very long, flesh-colored string.

“It would have taken you about thirty seconds longer to walk down the stairs,” said Ron.

“Time is Galleons, little brother,” said Fred. “Anyway, Harry, you’re interfering with reception. Extendable Ears,” he added in response to Harry’s raised eyebrows, holding up the string, which Harry now saw was trailing out onto the landing. “We’re trying to hear what’s going on downstairs.”

“You want to be careful,” said Ron, staring at the ear. “If Mum

sees one of them again . . .”

“It’s worth the risk, that’s a major meeting they’re having,” said Fred.

The door opened and a long mane of red hair appeared.

“Oh hello, Harry!” said Ron’s younger sister, Ginny, brightly. “I thought I heard your voice.”

Turning to Fred and George she said, “It’s no go with the Extendable Ears, she’s gone and put an Imperturbable Charm on the kitchen door.”

“How d’you know?” said George, looking crestfallen.

“Tonks told me how to find out,” said Ginny. “You just chuck stuff at the door and if it can’t make contact the door’s been Imperturbed. I’ve been flicking Dungbombs at it from the top of the stairs and they just soar away from it, so there’s no way the Extendable Ears will be able to get under the gap.”

Fred heaved a deep sigh. “Shame. I really fancied finding out what old Snape’s been up to.”

“Snape?” said Harry quickly. “Is he here?”

“Yeah,” said George, carefully closing the door and sitting down on one of the beds; Fred and Ginny followed. “Giving a report. Top secret.”

“Git,” said Fred idly.

“He’s on our side now,” said Hermione reprovingly.

Ron snorted. “Doesn’t stop him being a git. The way he looks at us when he sees us . . .”

“Bill doesn’t like him either,” said Ginny, as though that settled the matter.

Harry was not sure his anger had abated yet; but his thirst for information was now overcoming his urge to keep shouting. He sank onto the bed opposite the others.

“Is Bill here?” he asked. “I thought he was working in Egypt.”

“He applied for a desk job so he could come home and work for the Order,” said Fred. “He says he misses the tombs, but,” he smirked, “there are compensations . . .”

“What d’you mean?”

“Remember old Fleur Delacour?” said George. “She’s got a job at Gringotts to *emprove ’er Eeenglish* —”

“— and Bill’s been giving her a lot of private lessons,” sniggered Fred.

“Charlie’s in the Order too,” said George, “but he’s still in Romania, Dumbledore wants as many foreign wizards brought in as possible, so Charlie’s trying to make contacts on his days off.”

“Couldn’t Percy do that?” Harry asked. The last he had heard, the third Weasley brother was working in the Department of International Magical Cooperation at the Ministry of Magic.

At these words all the Weasleys and Hermione exchanged darkly significant looks.

“Whatever you do, don’t mention Percy in front of Mum and Dad,” Ron told Harry in a tense voice.

“Why not?”

“Because every time Percy’s name’s mentioned, Dad breaks whatever he’s holding and Mum starts crying,” Fred said.

“It’s been awful,” said Ginny sadly.

"I think we're well shut of him," said George with an uncharacteristically ugly look on his face.

"What's happened?" Harry said.

"Percy and Dad had a row," said Fred. "I've never seen Dad row with anyone like that. It's normally Mum who shouts . . ."

"It was the first week back after term ended," said Ron. "We were about to come and join the Order. Percy came home and told us he'd been promoted."

"You're kidding?" said Harry.

Though he knew perfectly well that Percy was highly ambitious, Harry's impression was that Percy had not made a great success of his first job at the Ministry of Magic. Percy had committed the fairly large oversight of failing to notice that his boss was being controlled by Lord Voldemort (not that the Ministry had believed that — they all thought that Mr. Crouch had gone mad).

"Yeah, we were all surprised," said George, "because Percy got into a load of trouble about Crouch, there was an inquiry and everything. They said Percy ought to have realized Crouch was off his rocker and informed a superior. But you know Percy, Crouch left him in charge, he wasn't going to complain . . ."

"So how come they promoted him?"

"That's exactly what we wondered," said Ron, who seemed very keen to keep normal conversation going now that Harry had stopped yelling. "He came home really pleased with himself — even more pleased than usual if you can imagine that — and told Dad he'd been offered a position in Fudge's own office. A really good one for someone only a year out of Hogwarts — Junior Assistant to the

Minister. He expected Dad to be all impressed, I think.”

“Only Dad wasn’t,” said Fred grimly.

“Why not?” said Harry.

“Well, apparently Fudge has been storming round the Ministry checking that nobody’s having any contact with Dumbledore,” said George.

“Dumbledore’s name’s mud with the Ministry these days, see,” said Fred. “They all think he’s just making trouble saying You-Know-Who’s back.”

“Dad says Fudge has made it clear that anyone who’s in league with Dumbledore can clear out their desks,” said George.

“Trouble is, Fudge suspects Dad, he knows he’s friendly with Dumbledore, and he’s always thought Dad’s a bit of a weirdo because of his Muggle obsession —”

“But what’s this got to do with Percy?” asked Harry, confused.

“I’m coming to that. Dad reckons Fudge only wants Percy in his office because he wants to use him to spy on the family — and Dumbledore.”

Harry let out a low whistle.

“Bet Percy loved that.”

Ron laughed in a hollow sort of way.

“He went completely berserk. He said — well, he said loads of terrible stuff. He said he’s been having to struggle against Dad’s lousy reputation ever since he joined the Ministry and that Dad’s got no ambition and that’s why we’ve always been — you know — not had a lot of money, I mean —”

“*What?*” said Harry in disbelief, as Ginny made a noise like an

angry cat.

“I know,” said Ron in a low voice. “And it got worse. He said Dad was an idiot to run around with Dumbledore, that Dumbledore was heading for big trouble and Dad was going to go down with him, and that he — Percy — knew where his loyalty lay and it was with the Ministry. And if Mum and Dad were going to become traitors to the Ministry he was going to make sure everyone knew he didn’t belong to our family anymore. And he packed his bags the same night and left. He’s living here in London now.”

Harry swore under his breath. He had always liked Percy least of Ron’s brothers, but he had never imagined he would say such things to Mr. Weasley.

“Mum’s been in a right state,” said Ron. “You know — crying and stuff. She came up to London to try and talk to Percy but he slammed the door in her face. I dunno what he does if he meets Dad at work — ignores him, I s’pose.”

“But Percy *must* know Voldemort’s back,” said Harry slowly. “He’s not stupid; he must know your mum and dad wouldn’t risk everything without proof —”

“Yeah, well, your name got dragged into the row,” said Ron, shooting Harry a furtive look. “Percy said the only evidence was your word and . . . I dunno . . . he didn’t think it was good enough.”

“Percy takes the *Daily Prophet* seriously,” said Hermione tartly, and the others all nodded.

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked, looking around at them all. They were all regarding him warily.

“Haven’t — haven’t you been getting the *Daily Prophet*?”

Hermione asked nervously.

“Yeah, I have!” said Harry.

“Have you — er — been reading it thoroughly?” Hermione asked still more anxiously.

“Not cover to cover,” said Harry defensively. “If they were going to report anything about Voldemort it would be headline news, wouldn’t it!”

The others flinched at the sound of the name. Hermione hurried on, “Well, you’d need to read it cover to cover to pick it up, but they — um — they mention you a couple of times a week.”

“But I’d have seen —”

“Not if you’ve only been reading the front page, you wouldn’t,” said Hermione, shaking her head. “I’m not talking about big articles. They just slip you in, like you’re a standing joke.”

“What d’you — ?”

“It’s quite nasty, actually,” said Hermione in a voice of forced calm. “They’re just building on Rita’s stuff.”

“But she’s not writing for them anymore, is she?”

“Oh no, she’s kept her promise — not that she’s got any choice,” Hermione added with satisfaction. “But she laid the foundation for what they’re trying to do now.”

“Which is *what*?” said Harry impatiently.

“Okay, you know she wrote that you were collapsing all over the place and saying your scar was hurting and all that?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, who was not likely to forget Rita Skeeter’s stories about him in a hurry.

“Well, they’re writing about you as though you’re this deluded, attention-seeking person who thinks he’s a great tragic hero or something,” said Hermione, very fast, as though it would be less unpleasant for Harry to hear these facts quickly. “They keep slipping in snide comments about you. If some far-fetched story appears they say something like ‘a tale worthy of Harry Potter’ and if anyone has a funny accident or anything it’s ‘let’s hope he hasn’t got a scar on his forehead or we’ll be asked to worship him next —’”

“I don’t want anyone to worship —” Harry began hotly.

“I know you don’t,” said Hermione quickly, looking frightened. “I *know*, Harry. But you see what they’re doing? They want to turn you into someone nobody will believe. Fudge is behind it, I’ll bet anything. They want wizards on the street to think you’re just some stupid boy who’s a bit of a joke, who tells ridiculous tall stories because he loves being famous and wants to keep it going.”

“I didn’t ask — I didn’t want — *Voldemort killed my parents!*” Harry spluttered. “I got famous because he murdered my family but couldn’t kill me! Who wants to be famous for that? Don’t they think I’d rather it’d never —”

“We *know*, Harry,” said Ginny earnestly.

“And of course, they didn’t report a word about the dementors attacking you,” said Hermione. “Someone’s told them to keep that quiet. That should’ve been a really big story, out-of-control dementors. They haven’t even reported that you broke the International Statute of Secrecy — we thought they would, it would tie in so well with this image of you as some stupid show-off — we think they’re biding their time until you’re expelled, then they’re

really going to go to town. — I mean, *if* you're expelled, obviously," she went on hastily, "you really shouldn't be, not if they abide by their own laws, there's no case against you."

They were back on the hearing and Harry did not want to think about it. He cast around for another change of subject, but was saved the necessity of finding one by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs.

"Uh-oh."

Fred gave the Extendable Ear a hearty tug, there was another loud crack and he and George vanished. Seconds later, Mrs. Weasley appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"The meeting's over, you can come down and have dinner now, everyone's dying to see you, Harry. And who's left all those Dungbombs outside the kitchen door?"

"Crookshanks," said Ginny unblushingly. "He loves playing with them."

"Oh," said Mrs. Weasley, "I thought it might have been Kreacher, he keeps doing odd things like that. Now don't forget to keep your voices down in the hall. Ginny, your hands are filthy, what have you been doing? Go and wash them before dinner, please. . . ."

Ginny grimaced at the others and followed her mother out of the room, leaving Harry alone with Ron and Hermione again. Both of them were watching him apprehensively, as though they feared that he would start shouting again now that everyone else had gone. The sight of them looking so nervous made him feel slightly ashamed.

"Look . . ." he muttered, but Ron shook his head, and Hermione said quietly, "We knew you'd be angry, Harry, we really don't blame

you, but you've got to understand, we *did* try and persuade Dumbledore —”

“Yeah, I know,” said Harry grudgingly.

He cast around for a topic to change the subject from Dumbledore — the very thought of him made Harry's insides burn with anger again.

“Who's Kreacher?” he asked.

“The house-elf who lives here,” said Ron. “Nutter. Never met one like him.”

Hermione frowned at Ron.

“He's not a *nutter*, Ron —”

“His life's ambition is to have his head cut off and stuck up on a plaque just like his mother,” said Ron irritably. “Is that normal, Hermione?”

“Well — well, if he is a bit strange, it's not his fault —”

Ron rolled his eyes at Harry.

“Hermione still hasn't given up on *spew* —”

“It's not ‘spew’!” said Hermione heatedly. “It's the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, and it's not just me, Dumbledore says we should be kind to Kreacher too —”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Ron. “C'mon, I'm starving.”

He led the way out of the door and onto the landing, but before they could descend the stairs — “Hold it!” Ron breathed, flinging out an arm to stop Harry and Hermione walking any farther. “They're still in the hall, we might be able to hear something —”

The three of them looked cautiously over the banisters. The

gloomy hallway below was packed with witches and wizards, including all of Harry's guard. They were whispering excitedly together. In the very center of the group Harry saw the dark, greasy-haired head and prominent nose of his least favorite teacher at Hogwarts, Professor Snape. Harry leaned farther over the banisters. He was very interested in what Snape was doing for the Order of the Phoenix.

A thin piece of flesh-colored string descended in front of Harry's eyes. Looking up he saw Fred and George on the landing above, cautiously lowering the Extendable Ear toward the dark knot of people below. A moment later, however, they began to move toward the front door and out of sight.

"Dammit," Harry heard Fred whisper, as he hoisted the Extendable Ear back up again.

They heard the front door open and then close.

"Snape never eats here," Ron told Harry quietly. "Thank God. C'mon."

"And don't forget to keep your voice down in the hall, Harry," Hermione whispered.

As they passed the row of house-elf heads on the wall they saw Lupin, Mrs. Weasley, and Tonks at the front door, magically sealing its many locks and bolts behind those who had just left.

"We're eating down in the kitchen," Mrs. Weasley whispered, meeting them at the bottom of the stairs. "Harry, dear, if you'll just tiptoe across the hall, it's through this door here —"

CRASH.

"*Tonks!*" cried Mrs. Weasley exasperatedly, turning to look behind

her.

“I’m sorry!” wailed Tonks, who was lying flat on the floor. “It’s that stupid umbrella stand, that’s the second time I’ve tripped over —”

But the rest of her words were drowned by a horrible, earsplitting, bloodcurdling screech.

The moth-eaten velvet curtains Harry had passed earlier had flown apart, but there was no door behind them. For a split second, Harry thought he was looking through a window, a window behind which an old woman in a black cap was screaming and screaming as though she was being tortured — then he realized it was simply a life-size portrait, but the most realistic, and the most unpleasant, he had ever seen in his life.

The old woman was drooling, her eyes were rolling, the yellowing skin of her face stretched taut as she screamed, and all along the hall behind them, the other portraits awoke and began to yell too, so that Harry actually screwed up his eyes at the noise and clapped his hands over his ears.

Lupin and Mrs. Weasley darted forward and tried to tug the curtains shut over the old woman, but they would not close and she screeched louder than ever, brandishing clawed hands as though trying to tear at their faces.

“Filth! Scum! By-products of dirt and vileness! Half-breeds, mutants, freaks, begone from this place! How dare you befoul the house of my fathers —”

Tonks apologized over and over again, at the same time dragging the huge, heavy troll’s leg back off the floor. Mrs. Weasley

abandoned the attempt to close the curtains and hurried up and down the hall, Stunning all the other portraits with her wand. Then a man with long black hair came charging out of a door facing Harry.

“Shut up, you horrible old hag, shut UP!” he roared, seizing the curtain Mrs. Weasley had abandoned.

The old woman’s face blanched.

“*Yooooou!*” she howled, her eyes popping at the sight of the man. “*Blood traitor, abomination, shame of my flesh!*”

“I said — shut — UP!” roared the man, and with a stupendous effort he and Lupin managed to force the curtains closed again.

The old woman’s screeches died and an echoing silence fell.

Panting slightly and sweeping his long dark hair out of his eyes, Harry’s godfather, Sirius, turned to face him.

“Hello, Harry,” he said grimly, “I see you’ve met my mother.”

Grimmauldplein 12

“Wat is die orde van –?” begin Harry.

“Nie hier nie, seun!” snou Moodie. “Wag tot ons binne is!”

Hy pluk die stuk perkament uit Harry se hand en steek dit met die punt van sy towerstaf aan die brand. Terwyl die boodskap vlammend opkrul en grond toe fladder, bekyk Harry die huise weer. Hulle staan voor nommer 11. Hy kyk na links en sien nommer 10. Aan die regterkant is nommer 13.

“Maar waar’s –?”

“Dink aan wat jy so pas gememoriseer het,” sê Lupin gedemp.

Harry doen dit en toe hy by die gedeelte oor Grimmauldplein 12 kom, verskyn ’n gehawende deur uit die niet tussen nommers 11 en 13, vinnig gevolg deur vuil mure en smerige vensters. Dis asof ’n ekstra huis opgeblaas en die huise aan weerskante uit die pad gedruk het. Harry gaap dit aan. Die stereo in nommer 11 daver voort. Skynbaar het die Moggels binne-in niks gemerk nie.

“Komaan, opskud,” grom Moodie en druk Harry in die rug.

Harry stap met die verweerde kliptreetjies op en staar na die deur wat so pas gematerialiseer het. Die swart verf is verweer en gekrap. Die silwer deurklopper is in die vorm van ’n gekrulde slang. Daar is geen sleutelgat of posgleuf nie.

Lupin haal sy towerstaf uit en tik een keer teen die deur. Harry hoor ’n reeks metaalagtige klikke en iets wat soos die geklater van ’n ketting klink. Die deur gaan krakend oop.

“Gaan gou in, Harry,” fluister Lupin, “maar nie te ver nie en moet aan niks raak nie.”

Harry tree oor die drumpel tot in die feitlik pikdonker voorportaal. Hy ruik klammigheid, stof en ’n effens soet, verrottende geur. Die plek het die gevoel van ’n verlate gebou. Hy kyk oor sy skouer en sien dat die ander hom volg. Lupin en Tonks dra sy trommel en Hedwig se kou. Moodie staan op die boonste treetjie en laat die balle lig vry wat die Uitklikker by die straatlampe gesteel het. Hulle vlieg terug na hul lampe en die straatblok gloei vir ’n oomblik

oranje voor Moodie binnetoe hink en die voordeur toestoot sodat die voorportaal nou stikdonker is.

"Hier –"

Hy tik Harry hard op die kop met sy towerstaf. Dit voel vir Harry asof iets warmes teen sy rug afdrup en hierdie keer weet hy die Ontgogelingstowerspreuk is verbreek.

"Staan nou stil, julle almal, ek maak vir ons lig," fluister Moodie.

Die ander se gedempte stemme skep 'n beklemmende gevoel van afwagting by Harry. Dis asof hulle in 'n sterwende persoon se huis is. Hy hoor 'n sagte suisgeluid en toe raak outydse gaslampe teen die mure sissend aan die brand en gooi dowwe, flikkerende ligbane oor die lang somber gang. Harry sien muurpapier wat lostrek, 'n verweerde tapyt, 'n kandelaar vol spinnerakke en portrette wat swart van die ouderdom is en skeef teen die mure hang. Sowel die kandelaar as die kersblakers wat op 'n lendelam tafeltjie staan, is in die vorm van slange. Agter die vloerlys skarrel iets.

Daar is vinnige voetstappe en Ron se ma, mevrou Weasley, verskyn in die deur aan die oorkant van die portaal. Sy straal van blydskap terwyl sy haastig nader kom, maar Harry merk dat sy effens maerder en bleker is as toe hy haar laas gesien het.

"O, Harry, dis heerlik om jou te sien!" fluister sy en druk hom vas in 'n omhelsing wat amper sy ribbes kraak voor sy terugtree en hom ondersoekend bekyk. "Jy lyk siekerig en ons sal jou moet vet voer, maar ek's bevrees jy sal 'n rukkie vir jou aandete moet wag."

Sy draai na die klomp towenaars en fluister dringend: "Hy het so pas opgedaag. Die vergadering het begin."

Die towenaars agter Harry maak opgewonde geluide en stap verby hom na die deur waaruit mevrou Weasley so pas verskyn het. Harry wil vir Lupin volg, maar mevrou Weasley keer hom.

"Nee, Harry, die vergadering is net vir lede van die Orde. Ron en Hermien is bo in die kamer. Jy kan by hulle gaan wag tot die vergadering verby is. Ons sal daarna iets eet. En praat tog saggies in die voorportaal," voeg sy in 'n dringende fluisterstem by.

"Hoekom?"

"Ons wil nie hê enigiets moet wakker word nie."

"Wat bedoel –?"

"Ek sal later verduidelik, ek moet gaan, ek's veronderstel om by die vergadering te wees – ek wys net gou vir jou waar jy slaap."

Met haar vinger teen haar lippe gedruk, lei sy hom op haar tone verby lang, motgevrete gordyne waaragter Harry reken nog 'n deur moet wees, en om 'n groot sambreelstaander wat lyk asof dit van 'n afgekapte trolbeen gemaak is. Hulle klim met 'n stel donker trappe

op, verby 'n ry gekrimpte koppe wat op houtborde teen die muur gemonteer is. Harry bekyk dit van naderby en sien dis huiselwe se koppe. Almal het dieselfde effens snoetagtige neuse.

Harry voel met elke tree nog meer deurmekaar. Wat op aarde maak hulle in 'n huis wat lyk asof dit aan die Donkerste van toeweneus behoort?

"Mevrou Weasley, hoekom –?"

"Ron en Hermien sal alles verduidelik, skat, ek moet regtig gaan," fluster mevrou Weasley verstrooid. "Daar –" hulle het die tweede trapportaal bereik, "– die deur aan die regterkant. Ek sal julle kom loep sodra dit verby is."

Sy gaan haastig ondertoe.

Harry steek die verwaarloosde trapportaal oor, draai die deurknop wat soos 'n slang se kop lyk en stoot die deur oop.

Hy sien vlugtig 'n somber vertrek met 'n hoë plafon en twee beddens. Toe is daar 'n harde kwettergeluid, gevolg deur 'n oorverdowende kreet, en sy visie word deur 'n baie groot bos hare versper. Hermien het haar op hom gewerp om hom te omhels en hom amper onderstebo gestamp, terwyl Ron se uiltjie, Pigwidgeon, opgewonde al om hulle koppe vlieg.

"HARRY! Ron, hy's hier, Harry is hier! Ons het jou nie hoor kom nie! Hoe gaan dit met jou? Is jy oukei? Jy's seker verskriklik kwaad vir ons. Ek wed jy is, ek weet ons briewe was nutteloos – maar ons mag jou niks vertel het nie, Dompeldorius het ons laat sweer, o, daar is so baie wat ons vir jou moet vertel en jy vir ons – die Dementors! En daardie Ministerie-verhoor – dis net belaglik, ek het dit nageslaan, hulle kan jou nie skors nie, hulle kan eenvoudig nie, daar's voorsiening in die Ordonnansie vir die Redelike Beperking van Towery deur Minderjariges vir die gebruik van toordery in lewensbedreigende omstandighede –"

"Hy kan nie asem kry nie, Hermien," sê Ron grinnikend terwyl hy die deur agter Harry toestoot. Dit lyk asof Ron die afgelope maand 'n hele paar sentimeter gegroei het sodat hy nog langer en slungelagtig as tevore lyk, hoewel sy lang neus, helderrooi hare en sproete nog dieselfde is.

Hermien straal nog van opgewondenheid toe sy vir Harry laat los, maar voor sy verder kan praat, is daar 'n sagte woesj-geluid en iets wits swiep bo van die kas af en land saggies op Harry se skouer.

"Hedwig!"

Die sneeu-uil klik haar snawel en knibbel Harry se oor liefderik terwyl hy haar vere streel.

“Sy was in ’n toestand,” sê Ron. “Het ons half doodgepik toe sy jou laaste brief gebring het, kyk hier –”

Hy wys die voorvinger van sy regterhand vir Harry. Daar is ’n sny wat amper gesond, maar duidelik baie diep is.

“O ja,” sê Harry. “Jammer daaroor, maar ek wou antwoorde hê, weet jy –”

“Ons wou dit vir jou gee, pêl,” sê Ron. “Hermien was baie omgekrap, sy’t aanmekaar gesê jy sal iets doms aanvang as jy die hele tyd sonder nuus is, maar Dompeldorius het ons –”

“– laat sweer om niks vir my te sê nie,” sê Harry. “Ja, Hermien het dit reeds gesê.”

Die warm gloed wat in hom opgewel het toe hy sy twee beste vriende sien, word geblus deur iets ysigs in sy maag. Skielik – ná ’n volle maand waarin hy nie kon wag om hulle te sien nie – wil hy liewer hê Ron en Hermien moet hom net uitlos.

Daar is ’n gespanne stilte waarin Harry vir Hedwig meganies streel en nie na die ander twee kyk nie.

“Hy’t gedink dis die beste ding om te doen,” sê Hermien effens uitasem. “Ek bedoel, Dompeldorius.”

“Ja,” sê Harry. Hy sien daar is ook pikmerke van Hedwig op haar hande en besef dat hy glad nie jammer is nie.

“Ek dink hy’t gedink jy’s die veiligste by die Moggels –” begin Ron.

“O, nogal?” Harry lig sy wenkbroue. “Is een van julle hierdie somer deur Dementors aangeval?”

“Wel, nee – maar dis hoekom hy mense van die Orde van die Feniks jou die hele tyd laat volg het –”

Harry voel ’n skok in sy ingewande asof hy ondertoe getrap en ’n tree gemis het. Dus het almal behalwe hy geweet hy word dopgehou.

“Dit het nie juis gewerk nie, het dit?” sê hy en doen sy bes om sy stem kalm te hou. “Op die ou end moes ek maar na myself kyk, of hoe?”

“Hy was só kwaad,” sê Hermien in ’n verskrikte stem. “Dompeldorius. Ons het hom gesien. Toe hy uitvind Mundungus het geloop voor sy skof om is. Ek was regtig bang vir hom.”

“Wel, ek is bly hy’t geloop,” sê Harry koud. “As hy nie geloop het nie, het ek nie getoor nie en dan het Dompeldorius my seker die hele somer by die Dursleys laat bly.”

“Is jy . . . is jy nie bekommerd oor die Ministerie vir Towerkuns se verhoor nie?” vra Hermien sag.

“Nee,” lieg Harry uitdagend. Hy stap van hulle af weg en kyk om hom rond. Hedwig sit nog steeds rustig op sy skouer, maar die

kan net doen niks om hom beter te laat voel nie. Dis klam en donker. In 'n lee skilderdoek in 'n ryklik versierde raam is al wat teen die kaal alge-troopte mure hang en toe Harry verbystap, is dit asof iemand smalend lag, iemand wat buite sig wegkruip.

"Hoekom dring Dompeldorius daarop aan om my in die duister te hou?" vra Harry en dis met moeite dat hy sy stem ongeërg hou. "Het julle – hm – daaraan gedink om hom te vra?"

Hy kyk net betyds op om te sien hoe hulle na mekaar kyk – op 'n manier wat dit vir hom duidelik maak dat hy nou presies optree soos hulle gevrees het. Dit verbeter nie sy bui nie.

"Ons het vir Dompeldorius gesê ons wil jou vertel wat aangaan," sê Ron. "Ons het regtig, pëllie. Maar hy's op die oomblik verskriklik besig, ons het hom nog net twee keer gesien vandat ons hier gekom het en hy't nie baie tyd nie, hy't ons laat sweer om nie oor belangrike goed in ons briewe te skryf nie. Hy't gesê die uile kan anderskep word."

"Hy kon my laat weet het as hy wou," sê Harry kortaf. "Moenie vir my sê hy ken nie ander metodes vir boodskappe as uile nie."

Hermien loer na Ron en dan sê sy: "Ek het ook so gedink. Maar hy wou nie hê jy moet iets weet nie."

"Dalk dink hy ek kan nie vertrou word nie," sê Harry en hou hul uitdrukkings dop.

"Moenie simpel wees nie," sê Ron en hy lyk omgekrap.

"Of dat ek nie na myself kan kyk nie."

"Natuurlik dink hy nie dit nie!" sê Hermien verontwaardig.

"Hoekom moes ek dan by die Dursleys bly terwyl julle twee deel van alles wat hier gebeur?" sê Harry. Sy woorde tuimel haastig oor mekaar en sy stem word met elke woord harder. "Hoekom mag julle twee alles weet wat aangaan?"

"Ons weet nie alles nie!" keer Ron. "Ma wil ons nie naby die vergaderings toelaat nie. Sy sê ons is te jonk –"

Maar voor Harry homself kan keer, begin hy skree:

"SO JULLE WAS NIE BY DIE VERGADERINGS NIE? FOEI TOG! JULLE WAS MINSTENS HIER, OF HOE? JULLE WAS MINSTENS SAAM TERWYL EK VIR 'N MAAND BY DIE DURSLEYS MOES SIT! EN EK HET AL BAIE MEER AS JULLE HANTEER EN DOMPELDORIUS WEET DIT – WIE HET DIE TOWENAAR SE STEEN GERED? WIE HET VAN DHOEWELS ONTSLAE GERAAK? WIE HET JULLE TWEE SE BASSE VAN DIE DEMENTORS GERED?"

Elke bitter wrokgedagte wat Harry die afgelope maand opgekrop het, bars uit hom: sy frustrasie oor die gebrek aan nuus, die pyn dat hulle almal saam was sonder hom, sy woede dat hy gevolg is en nie

daarvan geweet het nie – al dié gevoelens waaroor hy half skaam was, bars deur sy selfbeheersing. Hedwig skrik vir die lawaai en vleg terug na haar sitplek op die kas. Pigwidgeon kwetter benoud en zoem nog vinniger om hulle koppe rond.

“WIE HET VERLEDE JAAR VERBY DIE DRAKE EN DIE SFINKSE EN ELKE ANDER WALGLIKE DING GEKOM? WIE HET HOM SIEN TERUGKOM? WIE HET VAN HOM ONTSNAP? EK!”

Ron staan net daar met sy mond halfoop, heeltemal verstom, terwyl Hermien lyk of sy gaan huil.

“MAAR HOEKOM MOET EK WEET WAT AANGAAN? HOEKOM SAL ENIGIEMAND DIE MOEITE DOEN OM VIR MY TE VERTEL WAT AANGAAN?”

“Harry, ons wou jou vertel, ons wou regtig –” begin Hermien.

“JULLE KON NIE SO GRAAG WOU NIE, KON JULLE, OF JULLE SOU VIR MY 'N UIL GESTUUR HET, MAAR DOMPELDORIUS HET JULLE LAAT SWEER –”

“Wel, hy het –”

“VIER WEKE WAARIN EK IN LIGUSTERLAAN MOES SIT EN KOERANTE UIT VULLISDROMME STEEL OM TE PROBEER UITVIND WAT AANGAAN –”

“Ons wou –”

“JULLE HET SEKER ALMAL LEKKER GELAG, HÊ? ALMAL EWE LEKKER BYMEKAAR –”

“Nee, regtig –” sê Ron floutjies.

“Harry, ons is regtig baie jammer!” sê Hermien wanhopig. Haar oë blink van die trane. “Jy’s heeltemal reg, Harry – ek sou ook briesend kwaad gewees het as dit ek was.”

Harry gluur na haar. Hy haal swaar asem. Hy draai weer weg en stap op en neer. Hedwig hoe-hoe bedruk bo-op die kas. Daar is ’n lang stilte wat net deur die neerdrukkende gekraak van die vloerplanke onder Harry se voete onderbreek word.

“Watse plek is dit in elk geval hierdie?” vra hy vir Ron.

“Hoofkwartier van die Orde van die Feniks,” sê Ron dadelik.

“Gaan enigiemand so gaaf wees om vir my te sê wat die Orde van die Feniks is?”

“Dis ’n geheime organisasie,” sê Hermien vinnig. “Dompeldorius is in bevel, hy’t dit gestig. Dis die mense wat die vorige keer teen Jy-Weet-Wie geveg het.”

“Wie is daarin?” vra Harry, wat vasgesteek het.

“’n Hele klomp mense –”

“Ons het omtrent al twintig van hulle ontmoet,” sê Ron, “maar ons dink daar is nog.”

Harry gluur hulle aan.

"Wat?" sê hy en kyk van die een na die ander.

"Hm," sê Ron. "Wel, wat?"

"Woldemort!" sê Harry ergerlik en sowel Ron as Hermien krimp innikkaar. "Wat gaan aan? Wat doen hy? Waar is hy? Wat gaan ons doen om hom te keer?"

"Ons sê mos, die Orde laat ons nie in hul vergaderings toe nie," sê Hermien senuagtig. "Ons weet geen besonderhede nie – maar ons het 'n breë idee," voeg sy haastig by toe sy die uitdrukking op Harry se gesig sien.

"Fred en George het Verlengbare Ore uitgevind, sien," sê Ron. "Hulle is werklik nuttig."

"Verlengbare –?"

"Ore, ja. Ons het die laaste tyd opgehou om hulle te gebruik, want Ma het uitgevind en mal gegaan. Fred en George moes hulle wegsteek om te keer dat Ma alles wegsmyt. Maar ons het heelwat met hulle gehoor voor Ma agtergekom het wat ons doen. Ons weet dat van die Orde se lede bekende Doodseters volg, hulle dophou."

"Party werf nog lede vir die Orde," sê Hermien.

"En sommige van hulle hou oor iets wag," sê Ron. "Hulle praat gelukkig oor wagbeurte."

"Dié iets was nie dalk ek nie?" vra Harry sarkasties.

"O ja," sê Ron, wat lyk asof 'n lig vir hom opgaan.

Harry snork. Hy stap weer deur die vertrek en kyk na alles behalwe na Ron en Hermien. "Wat doen julle die hele tyd as julle nie die vergaderings mag bywoon nie? Julle't gesê julle is baie besig."

"Ons is," sê Hermien vinnig. "Ons moet die huis ontsmet, dit staan al jare leeg en allerhande goed broei hier uit. Ons het die kombuis skoongemaak en die meeste van die slaapkamers en ek dink ons gaan die sitkamer môre – AARG!"

Met twee harde klapgeluide verskyn Fred en George, Ron se twee ouer tweelingbroers, skielik uit die niet in die middel van die vertrek. Pigwidgeon fladder wild en gons weg om by Hedwig bo-op die kas te gaan sit.

"Hou nou op daarmee!" sê Hermien vererg vir die tweeling, wat net sulke rooi hare soos Ron het, hoewel hulle effens korter en friser gebou is.

"Hallo, Harry," glimlag George stralend. "Ons het gedink ons hoor jou sagte stemmetjie."

"Jy moenie jou woede so opkrop nie, Harry, laat dit uitborrel," sê Fred, ook met 'n stralende glimlag. "Daar's dalk 'n paar mense vyftig kilometer hiervandaan wat jou nie gehoor het nie."

“Dit lyk my julle twee het jul appareringstoets geslaag?” sê Harry knorrig.

“Met onderskeiding,” sê Fred, wat iets vashou wat soos ’n baie lang vleeskleurige tou lyk.

“Die trappe sou julle omtrent dertig sekondes langer geneem het,” sê Ron.

“Tyd is Galjoene, kleinboet,” sê Fred. “In elk geval, Harry, jy be-bodder die ontvangs. Verlengbare Ore,” voeg hy by toe hy Harry se geligte wenkbroue sien en hou die tou in die lug. Harry sien dat dit oor die trapportaal strek. “Ons probeer hoor wat daar onder aan-gaan.”

“Julle moet lig loop.” Ron staar na die Oor. “As Ma weer een van daai goed sien . . .”

“Dis die waagstuk werd, hulle’s besig met ’n belangrike vergade-ring,” sê Fred.

Die deur gaan oop en ’n lang bos rooi hare verskyn.

“O, hallo, Harry!” sê Ron se sussie, Ginny, vrolik. “Ek dag ek hoor jou stem.”

Sy draai na Fred en George. “Julle kan maar vergeet van die Ver-lengbare Ore. Syt ’n Onversteurbaarheidspreuk op die kombuis-deur gesit.”

“Hoe weet jy?” sê George afgehaal.

“Tonks het vir my gesê hoe om uit te vind. Jy gooi goed na die deur en as niks dit kan tref nie, dan’s dit Onversteurbaar gemaak. Ek het Misbomme van bo af gegooi en hulle seil net weg. Die Ver-lengbare Ore sal nooit onderdeur die deur kom nie.”

Fred sug diep.

“Dis jammer. Ek wil regtig graag weet wat ou Snerp kamma doen.”

“Snerp!” sê Harry vinnig. “Is hy hier?”

“Ja,” sê George. Hy stoot die deur versigtig toe en gaan sit op een van die beddens. Fred en Ginny volg sy voorbeeld. “Hy doen ver-slag. Topgeheim.”

“Die ou etter,” sê Fred droog.

“Hy’s nou aan ons kant,” sê Hermien verwytend.

Ron snork. “Dit maak hom nie minder van ’n etter nie. Die manier waarop hy na ons kyk as hy ons sien.”

“Bill hou ook niks van hom nie,” sê Ginny, asof die saak daarmee afgehandel is.

Harry is nie seker dat sy woede al bedaar het nie, maar hy smag só na inligting dat hy sy begeerte om aan te hou skree onderdruk. Hy gaan sit op die bed oorkant die res.

"En Bill hier?" vra hy. "Ek dag hy werk in Egipte."

"Hyt vir 'n lessenaarjop aansoek gedoen sodat hy huis toe kan kom en vir die Orde werk," sê Fred. "Hy sê hy mis die grafte, maar," hy pruilag, "daar is kompensasies."

"Wos?"

"Outhou jy vir ou Fleur Delacour?" sê George. "Sy werk by Edelfort om haar 'Eeenglish' te verbeter –"

"En Bill gee vir haar baie ekstra klasse," giggel Fred.

"Charlie is ook in die Orde," sê George, "maar hy's nog in Roemenie. Dompeldorius wil soveel moontlik buitelandse towenaars insluiting en Charlie probeer om op sy af dae kontakte op te bou."

"Hoekom doen Percy dit nie?" vra Harry. Volgens sy wete werk die derde Weasley-broer vir die Departement van Internasionale Towersamewerking by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns.

Toe hy dit sê, kyk al die Weasleys en Hermien betekenisvol na mekaar.

"Wat jy ook al doen, moenie Percy se naam voor Ma en Pa noem nie," sê Ron in 'n gespanne stem.

"Hoekom nie?"

"Want elke keer dat Percy se naam genoem word, breek Pa wat hy ook al in sy hande het en Ma begin huil," sê Fred.

"Dis aaklig," sê Ginny bedruk.

"Wel, ek dink dis 'n goeie ding dat ons van hom ontslae is," sê George met 'n ongewoon gemene trek op sy gesig.

"Wat het gebeur?" vra Harry.

"Pa en Percy het 'n uitval gehad," sê Fred. "Ek het Pa nog nooit so met iemand sien baklei nie. Dis gewoonlik Ma wat op ons skree."

"Dit was die eerste week ná die einde van die kwartaal," sê Ron. "Ons was op die punt om hier by die Orde aan te sluit. Toe kom Percy huis toe en sê hy's bevorder."

"Jy speel!" sê Harry.

Hoewel hy goed weet hoe ambisieus Percy is, was sy indruk dat Percy nie juis 'n sukses van sy loopbaan by die Ministerie maak nie. Percy het 'n taamlike groot blaps gemaak toe hy nie opgelet het dat sy baas deur die heer Woldemort beheer word nie – nie dat die Ministerie dit glo nie, hulle is almal oortuig meneer Crouch het mal geword.

"Ja, ons was baie verbaas," sê George, "want Percy was diep in die moeilikheid oor Crouch, daar was 'n ondersoek en alles. Hulle't gesê Percy moes agtergekom het Crouch is van sy kop af en vir iemand bo hom gesê het. Maar jy ken vir Percy. Crouch het hom in bevel gelaat en hy was nie van plan om te gaan kla nie."

“Hoekom het hulle hom dan bevorder?”

“Dis wat ons ook wil weet,” sê Ron, wat baie gretig lyk om te praat noudat Harry ophou skree het. “Hy was baie vol van homself toe hy by die huis kom – nog meer as gewoonlik, as jy jou dit kan voorstel – en hy’t vir Pa gesê hy’s ’n posisie in Broddelwerk se kantoor aangebied. ’n Baie goeie posisie vir iemand wat nog net ’n jaar uit Hogwarts is: Junior Assistent van die Minister. Ek dink hy’t gedink Pa gaan baie beïndruk wees.”

“Maar Pa was nie,” sê Fred grimmig.

“Hoekom nie?” vra Harry.

“Wel, blykbaar het Broddelwerk sy gewig rondgegooi in die Ministerie om seker te maak dat niemand met Dompeldorius kontak het nie,” sê George.

“Dompeldorius se naam is deesdae modder by die Ministerie, sien,” sê Fred. “Hulle dink almal hy stook kwaad as hy sê Jy-Weet-Wie is terug.”

“Pa sê Broddelwerk het dit duidelik gestel dat almal wat met Dompeldorius saamwerk, maar hul lessenaars kan leegmaak,” sê George.

“Die probleem is Broddelwerk verdink vir Pa. Hy weet hulle is vriende en hy dink nog altyd Pa is ’n bietjie getik omdat hy so mal is oor Moggels,” voeg Ron by.

“Maar wat het dit met Percy uit te waai?” vra Harry verward.

“Ek kom nog daarby. Pa reken Broddelwerk wil net vir Percy in sy kantoor hê om hom te gebruik om op sy eie familie te spioeneer – én op Dompeldorius.”

Harry fluit lank en laag.

“Ek wed Percy het daárvan gehou.”

Ron lag op ’n hol soort manier.

“Hy het mal gegaan. Hy’t gesê – wel, hy’t ’n klomp verskriklike goed gesê. Hy’t gesê hy veg al vandat hy by die Ministerie begin werk het teen Pa se slegte reputasie en dat Pa geen ambisie het nie en dat dit die rede is hoekom ons nog altyd – jy weet – nie baie geld het nie, ek bedoel –”

“Wat?” sê Harry geskok terwyl Ginny ’n geluid soos ’n woedende kat maak.

“Ek weet,” sê Ron in ’n skor stem. “En dit raak net erger. Hy’t gesê Pa is ’n idioot om met Dompeldorius te heul en dat Dompeldorius hom lelik gaan vasloop en dat Pa saam met hom sal ondergaan en dat hy – Percy – weet waar sy lojaliteit is en dit is by die Ministerie. En as Pa en Ma die Ministerie gaan verrai, sal hy seker maak dat almal weet hy’s nie meer deel van ons familie nie.

Hy tasse daardie selfde aand gepak en is vort. Hy woon nou hier in Londen."

Harry swets binnensmonds. Hy het nog altyd die minste van Percy van al Ron se broers gehou, maar hy het nooit kon droom Percy sal sulke goed vir meneer Weasley sê nie.

"Ma was in 'n toestand," sê Ron stroef. "Huil en so aan. Sy het Londen toe gekom om met Percy te praat, maar hy't die deur in haar geslaan, toegeklap. Ek weet nie wat hy doen as hy vir Pa by die werk taakloop nie – ignoreer hom seker net."

"Maar Percy móet weet Woldemort is terug," sê Harry stadig. "Hy's nie dom nie, hy behoort te weet jou ma en pa sal nie so iets sonder bewyse waag nie."

"Ja, wel, jou naam is ook in die bakleiery ingesleep," sê Ron en kyk vlugtig na Harry. "Percy het gesê die enigste getuienis is jou woord en... hmm, wel... hy dink nie dis goed genoeg nie."

"Percy vat die *Daaglikse Profeet* kop toe," sê Hermien pront en al die ander knik.

"Wat bedoel julle?" vra Harry en kyk na hulle. Hulle kyk behoedzaam na hom.

"Het jy – het jy nie die *Daaglikse Profeet* gekry nie?" vra Hermien senuagtig.

"Ja, ek het!"

"Het jy dit – hm – goed geles?" vra sy nog senuagtiger.

"Nie van voor tot agter nie," sê Harry verontskuldigend. "As hulle iets oor Woldemort wil sê, sal dit mos voorbladnuus wees, of hoe?"

Die ander krimp in mekaar toe hulle die naam hoor. Hermien gaan haastig voort: "Wel, jy sou dit van voor tot agter moes lees om dit te sien, maar hulle het – hm – hulle het jou elke week 'n paar keer genoem."

"Maar ek sou mos gesien het –"

"Nie as jy net die voorblad geles het nie, nee," sê Hermien en skud haar kop. "Ek praat nie nou oor groot artikels nie. Hulle laat glip jou naam in asof jy 'n soort grap is."

"Wat bedoel jy –?"

"Dis regtig baie lelik," sê Hermien in 'n stem wat sy duidelik met moeite beheer. "Hulle bou op Rika Skinner se goed."

"Maar sy skryf mos nie meer vir hulle nie?"

"O nee, sy't haar belofte gehou – nie dat sy 'n keuse het nie," voeg Hermien tevrede by. "Maar sy't die fondament gelê vir wat hulle nou probeer doen."

"Wat wat is?" vra Harry ongeduldig.

"Oukei, jy onthou hoe sy geskryf het dat jy oral in mekaarstort en

sê jou litteken is seer en wat nog alles?"

"Ja," sê Harry, wat Rika Skinner se stories oor hom nie gou sal vergeet nie.

"Wel, sy't oor jou geskryf asof jy hierdie verwarde persoon is wat aandag soek en dink hy's 'n groot tragiese held of so iets," sê Hermien baie vinnig, asof dit vir Harry minder onplesierig sal wees as hy die feite vinnig hoor. "Hulle laat glip aanhoudend allerhande agterbakse aanmerkings oor jou in. As die een of ander belaglike storie verskyn, dan sê hulle iets soos: 'n Verhaal wat Harry Potter waardig is en as iemand iets simpels oorkom, is dit. Kom ons hoop hy't nie 'n litteken op sy voorkop en dat ons hom in die toekoms moet aanbid nie' –"

"Ek wil nie aanbid word nie –" begin Harry ergerlik.

"Ek weet jy wil nie," sê Hermien vinnig en lyk bang. "Ek weet, Harry. Maar sien jy wat hulle doen? Hulle wil jou verander in iemand wat niemand sal glo nie. Ek is seker Broddelwerk sit agter alles. Hulle wil hê die towenaars op straat moet dink jy's hierdie simpel outjie wat so ietwat van 'n grap is en belaglike stories vertel omdat jy daarvan hou om beroemd te wees en dit graag so wil hou."

"Ek het nie gevra – ek wil nie – *Woldemort het my ouers vermoor!*" stotter Harry. "Ek is beroemd omdat hy my ouers vermoor het, maar my nie kon doodmaak nie! Wie wil vir so iets beroemd wees? Dink hulle nie ek sal veel eerder dat dit nooit –"

"Ons weet, Harry," sê Ginny ernstig.

"En natuurlik was daar nie 'n woord oor die Dementors wat jou aangeval het nie," sê Hermien. "Iemand het hulle aangesê om dit stil te hou. Dit moes 'n groot storie gewees het, Dementors wat buite beheer is. Hulle het nie eens gerapporteer dat jy die Internasionale Statuut op Geheimhouding verbreek het nie. Ons het gedink hulle sal, dit sou goed ingepas het by die beeld van die dom aandagsoeker. Maar hulle wag seker net tot jy geskors is voor hulle mal gaan – ek bedoel, as jy geskors word, natuurlik," voeg sy haastig by. "Jy behoort nie regtig nie, nie as hulle by hul eie reëls hou nie, daar's geen saak teen jou nie."

Hulle is terug by die verhoor en Harry wil nie daaraan dink nie. Hy tas rond na 'n ander onderwerp, maar bly die soektog gespaar deur die geluid van voetstappe wat met die trappe opkom.

"U-ou."

Fred gee die Verlengbare Oor 'n pluk, daar is twee harde klapgeluide en hy en George verdwyn. Sekondes later verskyn mevrou Weasley in die deur.

"Die vergadering is verby. Julle kan ondertoe kom vir aandete."

Die mense kan nie wag om jou te sien nie, Harry. En wie't al daardie Misbomme voor die kombuisdeur gelos?"

"Kromskeen," sê Ginny sonder om te bloos. "Hy speel graag daarmee."

"O," sê mevrou Weasley, "ek dag dis dalk Skepsel, hy doen die skaakste goed. Moenie vergeet om saggies te praat in die voorportaal nie. Ginny, jou hande is smerig, wat het jy gedoen? Gaan was hulle asseblief voor jy tafel toe kom."

Ginny grinnik vir hulle toe sy haar ma uit die kamer volg. Harry bly alleen agter by Ron en Hermien. Albei van hulle kyk benoud na hom asof hulle bang is hy gaan weer op hulle begin skree. Harry voel effens skuldig toe hy sien hoe gespanne hulle lyk.

"Luister..." mompel hy, maar Ron skud sy kop en Hermien sê saggies: "Ons weet jy's kwaad, Harry, ons blameer jou regtig nie, maar jy moet verstaan dat ons probeer het om vir Dompeldorius te ontred –"

"Ja, oukei, ek weet," sê Harry kortaf.

Hy soek na iets om te sê wat nie die skoolhoof sal betrek nie, want die blote gedagte aan Dompeldorius laat sy ingewande van woede brand.

"Wie is Skepsel?" vra hy.

"Die huiself wat hier woon," sê Ron. "Getik. Nog nooit so iets freë kom nie."

Hermien frons vir Ron.

"Hy's nie getik nie, Ron."

"Sy ambisie in die lewe is om sy kop te laat afkap en soos sy ma om te laat monteer," sê Ron vererg. "Is dit normaal, Hermien?"

"Wel – wel, as hy 'n bietjie eienaardig is, is dit nie sy skuld nie."

Ron rol sy oë vir Harry.

"Hermien is nog steeds besig met daardie SPOEG."

"Dis nie SPOEG nie," sê Hermien ergerlik. "Dis die Steungroep vir die Promosie en Ontwikkeling van Elwegelykheid. En dis nie net ek nie. Dompeldorius sê ook ons moet gaaf wees met Skepsel."

"Ja, ja," sê Ron. "Komaan, ek gaan dood van die honger."

Hy stap eerste uit tot by die trapportaal, maar voor hy met die trappe af stap –

"Wag 'n bietjie!" sis Ron en gooi sy arm uit om te keer dat Harry en Hermien verder stap. "Hulle's nog in die voorportaal. Dalk hoor ons iets."

Hulle loer behoedsaam oor die reling. Die dofverligte voorportaal is gepak met hekse en towenaars, insluitend al Harry se wagte. Hulle fluister opgewonde onder mekaar. In die middel van die

groep sien Harry die donker, oliërige kop en prominente neus van die goorste onderwyser by Hogwarts, professor Snerp. Harry leun verder oor die reling. Hy wil baie graag weet wat Snerp vir die Orde van die Feniks doen.

'n Dun vleeskleurige tou glip voor Harry verby. Hy kyk op en sien hoe Fred en George vanaf die trapportaal bô hom die Verlengbare Oor na die donker groep mense daar onder laat sak. Oomblikke later beweeg almal na die voordeur en tûit sig.

"Verbrands," hoor Harry vir Fred fluister terwyl hy die Verlengbare Oor weer ophys.

Hulle hoor hoe die voordeur oop- en toegaan.

"Snerp eet nooit hier nie," sê Ron saggies vir Harry. "Dank die vader. Komaan."

"En moenie vergeet om saggies te praat in die voorportaal nie, Harry," fluister Hermien.

Toe hulle verby die ry koppe van huiselwe teen die muur stap, sien hulle hoe Lupin, mevrou Weasley en Tonks die voordeur se klomp slotte en grendels met toorkrag verseël nadat die laastes uit is.

"Ons eet almal in die kombuis," fluister mevrou Weasley toe hulle onder by die trappe bymekaar kom. "Harry, skat, as jy net op jou tone deur die portaal sal stap, dis daardie deur –"

BOEM

"Tonks!" gil mevrou Weasley ergerlik toe sy omdraai en agter haar kyk.

"Ek is jammer!" kerm Tonks, wat plat op die vloer lê. "Dis daardie simpel sambreelstaander, dis die tweede keer dat ek daaroor val –"

Maar die res van haar woorde word uitgedoof deur 'n aaklige, oorverdwende, bloedstollende kreet.

Die motgevrete fluweelgordyne waar Harry 'n oomblik gelede verbygestap het, vlieg oop, maar daar is geen deur agter hulle nie. Vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde dink Harry hy kyk deur 'n venster, 'n venster waaragter 'n ou vrou in 'n swart mus staan en skree en skree asof sy gemartel word. Dan besef hy dis bloot 'n lewensgrootte portret, maar die mees realistiese en die onsmaklikste een wat hy nog ooit gesien het.

Die ou vrou kwyl, haar oë rol, haar geel gesigvel span styf met elke kreet. Al die ander portrette in die portaal word wakker en begin ook skree, so erg dat Harry sy oë toeknyp en sy hande oor sy ore klap.

Lupin en mevrou Weasley storm nader en probeer om die gordyne voor die ou vrou toe te trek, maar hulle wil nie toegaan nie en

sy skree nog harder en reik met haar kloue na hulle asof sy hul gesigte wil krap.

"Vuilgoed! Skuim! Afvalprodukte van hoon en smaad! Halfbloede, mutasies, fratse, gee pad uit hierdie plek! Hoe durf julle die huis van my vaders besmet –"

Tonks maak oor en oor verskoning, terwyl sy die trol se groot, swaar been orent stoot. Mevrouw Weasley probeer nie meer om die gordyne toe te trek nie, maar skarrel heen en weer in die portaal en skok al die ander portrette met haar towerstaf.

'n Man met lang swart hare storm by die deur oorkant Harry uit. "Bly stil, jou vieslike ou heks, hou jou BEK!" brul hy en gryp na die gordyne.

Die ou vrou se gesig word bleek.

"Jyyyyy!" skreeu sy en haar oë peul uit toe sy die man sien. *"Blodverraaier, gruwel, skande van my vlees!"*

"Ek het gesê – hou jou – BEK!" brul hy en met 'n bomenslike poging slaag hy en Lupin daarin om die gordyne toe te forseer.

Die ou vrou se krete sterf weg en 'n weergalmende stilte daal oor die portaal neer.

Terwyl hy sy lang donker hare hygend uit sy oë vee, draai Harry se peetpa, Sirius, na hom.

"Hallo, Harry," sê hy grimmig. "Ek sien jy't my ma ontmoet."

CHAPTER FIVE



THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX

Your — ?”

“My dear old mum, yeah,” said Sirius. “We’ve been trying to get her down for a month but we think she put a Permanent Sticking Charm on the back of the canvas. Let’s get downstairs, quick, before they all wake up again.”

“But what’s a portrait of your mother doing here?” Harry asked, bewildered, as they went through the door from the hall and led the way down a flight of narrow stone steps, the others just behind them.

“Hasn’t anyone told you? This was my parents’ house,” said Sirius. “But I’m the last Black left, so it’s mine now. I offered it to Dumbledore for headquarters — about the only useful thing I’ve been able to do.”

Harry, who had expected a better welcome, noted how hard and bitter Sirius’s voice sounded. He followed his godfather to the

bottom of the stairs and through a door leading into the basement kitchen.

It was scarcely less gloomy than the hall above, a cavernous room with rough stone walls. Most of the light was coming from a large fire at the far end of the room. A haze of pipe smoke hung in the air like battle fumes, through which loomed the menacing shapes of heavy iron pots and pans hanging from the dark ceiling. Many chairs had been crammed into the room for the meeting and a long wooden table stood in the middle of the room, littered with rolls of parchment, goblets, empty wine bottles, and a heap of what appeared to be rags. Mr. Weasley and his eldest son, Bill, were talking quietly with their heads together at the end of the table.

Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat. Her husband, a thin, balding, red-haired man, who wore horn-rimmed glasses, looked around and jumped to his feet.

“Harry!” Mr. Weasley said, hurrying forward to greet him and shaking his hand vigorously. “Good to see you!”

Over his shoulder Harry saw Bill, who still wore his long hair in a ponytail, hastily rolling up the lengths of parchment left on the table.

“Journey all right, Harry?” Bill called, trying to gather up twelve scrolls at once. “Mad-Eye didn’t make you come via Greenland, then?”

“He tried,” said Tonks, striding over to help Bill and immediately sending a candle toppling onto the last piece of parchment. “Oh no — *sorry* —”

“Here, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley, sounding exasperated, and she repaired the parchment with a wave of her wand. In the flash of light

caused by Mrs. Weasley's charm, Harry caught a glimpse of what looked like the plan of a building.

Mrs. Weasley had seen him looking. She snatched the plan off the table and stuffed it into Bill's heavily laden arms.

"This sort of thing ought to be cleared away promptly at the end of meetings," she snapped before sweeping off toward an ancient dresser from which she started unloading dinner plates.

Bill took out his wand, muttered "*Evanesco!*" and the scrolls vanished.

"Sit down, Harry," said Sirius. "You've met Mundungus, haven't you?"

The thing Harry had taken to be a pile of rags gave a prolonged, grunting snore and then jerked awake.

"Some'n say m' name?" Mundungus mumbled sleepily. "I 'gree with Sirius . . ."

He raised a very grubby hand in the air as though voting, his droopy, bloodshot eyes unfocused. Ginny giggled.

"The meeting's over, Dung," said Sirius, as they all sat down around him at the table. "Harry's arrived."

"Eh?" said Mundungus, peering balefully at Harry through his matted ginger hair. "Blimey, so 'e 'as. Yeah. . . you all right, 'arry?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

Mundungus fumbled nervously in his pockets, still staring at Harry, and pulled out a grimy black pipe. He stuck it in his mouth, ignited the end of it with his wand, and took a deep pull on it. Great billowing clouds of greenish smoke obscured him in seconds.

"Owe you a 'pology," grunted a voice from the middle of the

smelly cloud.

“For the last time, Mundungus,” called Mrs. Weasley, “will you please *not* smoke that thing in the kitchen, especially not when we’re about to eat!”

“Ah,” said Mundungus, “Right. Sorry, Molly.”

The cloud of smoke vanished as Mundungus stowed his pipe back in his pocket, but an acrid smell of burning socks lingered.

“And if you want dinner before midnight I’ll need a hand,” Mrs. Weasley said to the room at large. “No, you can stay where you are, Harry dear, you’ve had a long journey —”

“What can I do, Molly?” said Tonks enthusiastically, bounding forward.

Mrs. Weasley hesitated, looking apprehensive.

“Er — no, it’s all right, Tonks, you have a rest too, you’ve done enough today —”

“No, no, I want to help!” said Tonks brightly, knocking over a chair as she hurried toward the dresser from which Ginny was collecting cutlery.

Soon a series of heavy knives were chopping meat and vegetables of their own accord, supervised by Mr. Weasley, while Mrs. Weasley stirred a cauldron dangling over the fire and the others took out plates, more goblets, and food from the pantry. Harry was left at the table with Sirius and Mundungus, who was still blinking mournfully at him.

“Seen old Figgy since?” he asked.

“No,” said Harry, “I haven’t seen anyone.”

“See, I wouldn’t ’ave left,” said Mundungus, leaning forward, a

pleading note in his voice, "but I 'ad a business opportunity —"

Harry felt something brush against his knees and started, but it was only Crookshanks, Hermione's bandy-legged ginger cat, who wound himself once around Harry's legs, purring, then jumped onto Sirius's lap and curled up. Sirius scratched him absentmindedly behind the ears as he turned, still grim-faced, to Harry.

"Had a good summer so far?"

"No, it's been lousy," said Harry.

For the first time, something like a grin flitted across Sirius's face.

"Don't know what you're complaining about, myself."

"*What?*" said Harry incredulously.

"Personally, I'd have welcomed a dementor attack. A deadly struggle for my soul would have broken the monotony nicely. You think you've had it bad, at least you've been able to get out and about, stretch your legs, get into a few fights. . . . I've been stuck inside for a month."

"How come?" asked Harry, frowning.

"Because the Ministry of Magic's still after me, and Voldemort will know all about me being an Animagus by now, Wormtail will have told him, so my big disguise is useless. There's not much I can do for the Order of the Phoenix . . . or so Dumbledore feels."

There was something about the slightly flattened tone of voice in which Sirius uttered Dumbledore's name that told Harry that Sirius was not very happy with the headmaster either. Harry felt a sudden upsurge of affection for his godfather.

"At least you've known what's been going on," he said bracingly.

"Oh yeah," said Sirius sarcastically. "Listening to Snape's reports,

having to take all his snide hints that he's out there risking his life while I'm sat on my backside here having a nice comfortable time asking me how the cleaning's going —"

"What cleaning?" asked Harry.

"Trying to make this place fit for human habitation," said Sirius, waving a hand around the dismal kitchen. "No one's lived here for ten years, not since my dear mother died, unless you count her old house-elf, and he's gone round the twist, hasn't cleaned anything in ages —"

"Sirius?" said Mundungus, who did not appear to have paid any attention to this conversation, but had been minutely examining an empty goblet. "This solid silver, mate?"

"Yes," said Sirius, surveying it with distaste. "Finest fifteenth-century goblin-wrought silver, embossed with the Black family crest."

"That'd come off, though," muttered Mundungus, polishing it with his cuff.

"Fred = George = NO, JUST CARRY THEM!" Mrs. Weasley shrieked.

Harry, Sirius, and Mundungus looked around and, a split second later, dived away from the table. Fred and George had bewitched a large cauldron of stew, an iron flagon of butterbeer, and a heavy wooden breadboard, complete with knife, to hurtle through the air toward them. The stew skidded the length of the table and came to a halt just before the end, leaving a long black burn on the wooden surface, the flagon of butterbeer fell with a crash, spilling its contents everywhere, and the bread knife slipped off the board and landed,

point down and quivering ominously, exactly where Sirius's right hand had been seconds before.

"FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE!" screamed Mrs. Weasley. "THERE WAS NO NEED — I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS — JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE ALLOWED TO USE MAGIC NOW YOU DON'T HAVE TO WHIP YOUR WANDS OUT FOR EVERY TINY LITTLE THING!"

"We were just trying to save a bit of time!" said Fred, hurrying forward and wrenching the bread knife out of the table. "Sorry Sirius, mate — didn't mean to —"

Harry and Sirius were both laughing. Mundungus, who had toppled backward off his chair, was swearing as he got to his feet. Crookshanks had given an angry hiss and shot off under the dresser, from whence his large yellow eyes glowed in the darkness.

"Boys," Mr. Weasley said, lifting the stew back into the middle of the table, "your mother's right, you're supposed to show a sense of responsibility now you've come of age —"

"— none of your brothers caused this sort of trouble!" Mrs. Weasley raged at the twins, slamming a fresh flagon of butterbeer onto the table and spilling almost as much again. "Bill didn't feel the need to Apparate every few feet! Charlie didn't Charm everything he met! Percy —"

She stopped dead, catching her breath with a frightened look at her husband, whose expression was suddenly wooden.

"Let's eat," said Bill quickly.

"It looks wonderful, Molly," said Lupin, ladling stew onto a plate for her and handing it across the table.

For a few minutes there was silence but for the clink of plates and cutlery and the scraping of chairs as everyone settled down to their food. Then Mrs. Weasley turned to Sirius and said, "I've been meaning to tell you, there's something trapped in that writing desk in the drawing room, it keeps rattling and shaking. Of course, it could just be a boggart, but I thought we ought to ask Alastor to have a look at it before we let it out."

"Whatever you like," said Sirius indifferently.

"The curtains in there are full of doxies too," Mrs. Weasley went on. "I thought we might try and tackle them tomorrow."

"I look forward to it," said Sirius. Harry heard the sarcasm in his voice, but he was not sure that anyone else did.

Opposite Harry, Tonks was entertaining Hermione and Ginny by transforming her nose between mouthfuls. Screwing up her eyes each time with the same pained expression she had worn back in Harry's bedroom, her nose swelled to a beaklike protuberance like Snape's, shrank to something resembling a button mushroom, and then sprouted a great deal of hair from each nostril. Apparently this was a regular mealtime entertainment, because after a while Hermione and Ginny started requesting their favorite noses.

"Do that one like a pig snout, Tonks . . ."

Tonks obliged, and Harry, looking up, had the fleeting impression that a female Dudley was grinning at him from across the table.

Mr. Weasley, Bill, and Lupin were having an intense discussion about goblins.

"They're not giving anything away yet," said Bill. "I still can't work out whether they believe he's back or not. 'Course, they might

prefer not to take sides at all. Keep out of it.”

“I’m sure they’d never go over to You-Know-Who,” said Mr. Weasley, shaking his head. “They’ve suffered losses too. Remember that goblin family he murdered last time, somewhere near Nottingham?”

“I think it depends what they’re offered,” said Lupin. “And I’m not talking about gold; if they’re offered freedoms we’ve been denying them for centuries they’re going to be tempted. Have you still not had any luck with Ragnok, Bill?”

“He’s feeling pretty anti-wizard at the moment,” said Bill. “He hasn’t stopped raging about the Bagman business, he reckons the Ministry did a cover-up, those goblins never got their gold from him, you know —”

A gale of laughter from the middle of the table drowned the rest of Bill’s words. Fred, George, Ron, and Mundungus were rolling around in their seats.

“... and then,” choked Mundungus, tears running down his face, “and then, if you’ll believe it, ’e says to me, ’e says, ‘’ere, Dung, where didja get all them toads from? ’Cos some son of a Bludger’s gone and nicked all mine!’ And I says, ‘Nicked all your toads, Will, what next? So you’ll be wanting some more, then?’ And if you’ll believe me, lads, the gormless gargoyle buys all ’is own toads back orf me for twice what ’e paid in the first place —”

“I don’t think we need to hear any more of your business dealings, thank you very much, Mundungus,” said Mrs. Weasley sharply, as Ron slumped forward onto the table, howling with laughter.

“Beg pardon, Molly,” said Mundungus at once, wiping his eyes

and winking at Harry. "But, you know, Will nicked 'em orf Warty Harris in the first place so I wasn't really doing nothing wrong —"

"I don't know where you learned about right and wrong, Mundungus, but you seem to have missed a few crucial lessons," said Mrs. Weasley coldly.

Fred and George buried their faces in their goblets of butterbeer; George was hiccuping. For some reason, Mrs. Weasley threw a very nasty look at Sirius before getting to her feet and going to fetch a large rhubarb crumble for pudding. Harry looked round at his godfather.

"Molly doesn't approve of Mundungus," said Sirius in an undertone.

"How come he's in the Order?" Harry said very quietly.

"He's useful," Sirius muttered. "Knows all the crooks — well, he would, seeing as he's one himself. But he's also very loyal to Dumbledore, who helped him out of a tight spot once. It pays to have someone like Dung around, he hears things we don't. But Molly thinks inviting him to stay for dinner is going too far. She hasn't forgiven him for slipping off duty when he was supposed to be tailing you."

Three helpings of rhubarb crumble and custard later and the waistband on Harry's jeans was feeling uncomfortably tight (which was saying something, as the jeans had once been Dudley's). He lay down his spoon in a lull in the general conversation. Mr. Weasley was leaning back in his chair, looking replete and relaxed, Tonks was yawning widely, her nose now back to normal, and Ginny, who had lured Crookshanks out from under the dresser, was sitting cross-

legged on the floor, rolling butterbeer corks for him to chase.

“Nearly time for bed, I think,” said Mrs. Weasley on a yawn.

“Not just yet, Molly,” said Sirius, pushing away his empty plate and turning to look at Harry. “You know, I’m surprised at you. I thought the first thing you’d do when you got here would be to start asking questions about Voldemort.”

The atmosphere in the room changed with the rapidity Harry associated with the arrival of dementors. Where seconds before it had been sleepily relaxed, it was now alert, even tense. A frisson had gone around the table at the mention of Voldemort’s name. Lupin, who had been about to take a sip of wine, lowered his goblet slowly, looking wary.

“I did!” said Harry indignantly. “I asked Ron and Hermione but they said we’re not allowed in the Order, so —”

“And they’re quite right,” said Mrs. Weasley. “You’re too young.”

She was sitting bolt upright in her chair, her fists clenched upon its arms, every trace of drowsiness gone.

“Since when did someone have to be in the Order of the Phoenix to ask questions?” asked Sirius. “Harry’s been trapped in that Muggle house for a month. He’s got the right to know what’s been happen —”

“Hang on!” interrupted George loudly.

“How come Harry gets his questions answered?” said Fred angrily.

“We’ve been trying to get stuff out of you for a month and you haven’t told us a single stinking thing!” said George.

“*You’re too young, you’re not in the Order,*” said Fred, in a high-pitched voice that sounded uncannily like his mother’s. “Harry’s

not even of age!”

“It’s not my fault you haven’t been told what the Order’s doing,” said Sirius calmly. “That’s your parents’ decision. Harry, on the other hand —”

“It’s not down to you to decide what’s good for Harry!” said Mrs. Weasley sharply. Her normally kindly face looked dangerous. “You haven’t forgotten what Dumbledore said, I suppose?”

“Which bit?” Sirius asked politely, but with an air as though readying himself for a fight.

“The bit about not telling Harry more than he *needs to know*,” said Mrs. Weasley, placing a heavy emphasis on the last three words.

Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George’s heads turned from Sirius to Mrs. Weasley as though following a tennis rally. Ginny was kneeling amid a pile of abandoned butterbeer corks, watching the conversation with her mouth slightly open. Lupin’s eyes were fixed on Sirius.

“I don’t intend to tell him more than he *needs to know*, Molly,” said Sirius. “But as he was the one who saw Voldemort come back” (again, there was a collective shudder around the table at the name), “he has more right than most to —”

“He’s not a member of the Order of the Phoenix!” said Mrs. Weasley. “He’s only fifteen and —”

“— and he’s dealt with as much as most in the Order,” said Sirius, “and more than some —”

“No one’s denying what he’s done!” said Mrs. Weasley, her voice rising, her fists trembling on the arms of her chair. “But he’s still —”

“He’s not a child!” said Sirius impatiently.

“He’s not an adult either!” said Mrs. Weasley, the color rising in

her cheeks. "He's not *James*, Sirius!"

"I'm perfectly clear who he is, thanks, Molly," said Sirius coldly.

"I'm not sure you are!" said Mrs. Weasley. "Sometimes, the way you talk about him, it's as though you think you've got your best friend back!"

"What's wrong with that?" said Harry.

"What's wrong, Harry, is that you are *not* your father, however much you might look like him!" said Mrs. Weasley, her eyes still boring into Sirius. "You are still at school and adults responsible for you should not forget it!"

"Meaning I'm an irresponsible godfather?" demanded Sirius, his voice rising.

"Meaning you've been known to act rashly, Sirius, which is why Dumbledore keeps reminding you to stay at home and —"

"We'll leave my instructions from Dumbledore out of this, if you please!" said Sirius loudly.

"Arthur!" said Mrs. Weasley, rounding on her husband. "Arthur, back me up!"

Mr. Weasley did not speak at once. He took off his glasses and cleaned them slowly on his robes, not looking at his wife. Only when he had replaced them carefully on his nose did he say, "Dumbledore knows the position has changed, Molly. He accepts that Harry will have to be filled in to a certain extent now that he is staying at headquarters —"

"Yes, but there's a difference between that and inviting him to ask whatever he likes!"

"Personally," said Lupin quietly, looking away from Sirius at last,

as Mrs. Weasley turned quickly to him, hopeful that finally she was about to get an ally, "I think it better that Harry gets the facts — not all the facts, Molly, but the general picture — from us, rather than a garbled version from . . . others."

His expression was mild, but Harry felt sure that Lupin, at least, knew that some Extendable Ears had survived Mrs. Weasley's purge.

"Well," said Mrs. Weasley, breathing deeply and looking around the table for support that did not come, "well . . . I can see I'm going to be overruled. I'll just say this: Dumbledore must have had his reasons for not wanting Harry to know too much, and speaking as someone who has got Harry's best interests at heart —"

"He's not your son," said Sirius quietly.

"He's as good as," said Mrs. Weasley fiercely. "Who else has he got?"

"He's got me!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Weasley, her lip curling. "The thing is, it's been rather difficult for you to look after him while you've been locked up in Azkaban, hasn't it?"

Sirius started to rise from his chair.

"Molly, you're not the only person at this table who cares about Harry," said Lupin sharply. "Sirius, sit *down*."

Mrs. Weasley's lower lip was trembling. Sirius sank slowly back into his chair, his face white.

"I think Harry ought to be allowed a say in this," Lupin continued. "He's old enough to decide for himself."

"I want to know what's been going on," Harry said at once.

He did not look at Mrs. Weasley. He had been touched by what she

had said about his being as good as a son, but he was also impatient at her mollycoddling. . . . Sirius was right, he was *not* a child.

“Very well,” said Mrs. Weasley, her voice cracking. “Ginny — Ron — Hermione — Fred — George — I want you out of this kitchen, now.”

There was instant uproar.

“We’re of age!” Fred and George bellowed together.

“If Harry’s allowed, why can’t I?” shouted Ron.

“Mum, I *want* to!” wailed Ginny.

“NO!” shouted Mrs. Weasley, standing up, her eyes overbright. “I absolutely forbid —”

“Molly, you can’t stop Fred and George,” said Mr. Weasley wearily. “They *are* of age —”

“They’re still at school —”

“But they’re legally adults now,” said Mr. Weasley in the same tired voice.

Mrs. Weasley was now scarlet in the face.

“I — oh, all right then, Fred and George can stay, but Ron —”

“Harry’ll tell me and Hermione everything you say anyway!” said Ron hotly. “Won’t — won’t you?” he added uncertainly, meeting Harry’s eyes.

For a split second, Harry considered telling Ron that he wouldn’t tell him a single word, that he could try a taste of being kept in the dark and see how he liked it. But the nasty impulse vanished as they looked at each other.

“’Course I will,” Harry said. Ron and Hermione beamed.

“Fine!” shouted Mrs. Weasley. “Fine! Ginny — BED!”

Ginny did not go quietly. They could hear her raging and storming at her mother all the way up the stairs, and when she reached the hall Mrs. Black’s earsplitting shrieks were added to the din. Lupin hurried off to the portrait to restore calm. It was only after he had returned, closing the kitchen door behind him and taking his seat at the table again, that Sirius spoke.

“Okay, Harry . . . what do you want to know?”

Harry took a deep breath and asked the question that had been obsessing him for a month.

“Where’s Voldemort? What’s he doing? I’ve been trying to watch the Muggle news,” he said, ignoring the renewed shudders and winces at the name, “and there hasn’t been anything that looks like him yet, no funny deaths or anything—”

“That’s because there haven’t been any suspicious deaths yet,” said Sirius, “not as far as we know, anyway. . . . And we know quite a lot.”

“More than he thinks we do anyway,” said Lupin.

“How come he’s stopped killing people?” Harry asked. He knew that Voldemort had murdered more than once in the last year alone.

“Because he doesn’t want to draw attention to himself at the moment,” said Sirius. “It would be dangerous for him. His comeback didn’t come off quite the way he wanted it to, you see. He messed it up.”

“Or rather, you messed it up for him,” said Lupin with a satisfied smile.

“How?” Harry asked perplexedly.

“You weren’t supposed to survive!” said Sirius. “Nobody apart from his Death Eaters was supposed to know he’d come back. But you survived to bear witness.”

“And the very last person he wanted alerted to his return the moment he got back was Dumbledore,” said Lupin. “And you made sure Dumbledore knew at once.”

“How has that helped?” Harry asked.

“Are you kidding?” said Bill incredulously. “Dumbledore was the only one You-Know-Who was ever scared of!”

“Thanks to you, Dumbledore was able to recall the Order of the Phoenix about an hour after Voldemort returned,” said Sirius.

“So what’s the Order been doing?” said Harry, looking around at them all.

“Working as hard as we can to make sure Voldemort can’t carry out his plans,” said Sirius.

“How d’you know what his plans are?” Harry asked quickly.

“Dumbledore’s got a shrewd idea,” said Lupin, “and Dumbledore’s shrewd ideas normally turn out to be accurate.”

“So what does Dumbledore reckon he’s planning?”

“Well, firstly, he wants to build up his army again,” said Sirius. “In the old days he had huge numbers at his command; witches and wizards he’d bullied or bewitched into following him, his faithful Death Eaters, a great variety of Dark creatures. You heard him planning to recruit the giants; well, they’ll be just one group he’s after. He’s certainly not going to try and take on the Ministry of Magic with only a dozen Death Eaters.”

“So you’re trying to stop him getting more followers?”

“We’re doing our best,” said Lupin.

“How?”

“Well, the main thing is to try and convince as many people as possible that You-Know-Who really has returned, to put them on their guard,” said Bill. “It’s proving tricky, though.”

“Why?”

“Because of the Ministry’s attitude,” said Tonks. “You saw Cornelius Fudge after You-Know-Who came back, Harry. Well, he hasn’t shifted his position at all. He’s absolutely refusing to believe it’s happened.”

“But why?” said Harry desperately. “Why’s he being so stupid? If Dumbledore —”

“Ah, well, you’ve put your finger on the problem,” said Mr. Weasley with a wry smile. “*Dumbledore*.”

“Fudge is frightened of him, you see,” said Tonks sadly.

“Frightened of Dumbledore?” said Harry incredulously.

“Frightened of what he’s up to,” said Mr. Weasley. “You see, Fudge thinks Dumbledore’s plotting to overthrow him. He thinks Dumbledore wants to be Minister of Magic.”

“But Dumbledore doesn’t want —”

“Of course he doesn’t,” said Mr. Weasley. “He’s never wanted the Minister’s job, even though a lot of people wanted him to take it when Millicent Bagnold retired. Fudge came to power instead, but he’s never quite forgotten how much popular support Dumbledore had, even though Dumbledore never applied for the job.”

“Deep down, Fudge knows Dumbledore’s much cleverer than he is, a much more powerful wizard, and in the early days of his

Ministry he was forever asking Dumbledore for help and advice,” said Lupin. “But it seems that he’s become fond of power now, and much more confident. He loves being Minister of Magic, and he’s managed to convince himself that he’s the clever one and Dumbledore’s simply stirring up trouble for the sake of it.”

“How can he think that?” said Harry angrily. “How can he think Dumbledore would just make it all up — that *I’d* make it all up?”

“Because accepting that Voldemort’s back would mean trouble like the Ministry hasn’t had to cope with for nearly fourteen years,” said Sirius bitterly. “Fudge just can’t bring himself to face it. It’s so much more comfortable to convince himself Dumbledore’s lying to destabilize him.”

“You see the problem,” said Lupin. “While the Ministry insists there is nothing to fear from Voldemort, it’s hard to convince people he’s back, especially as they really don’t want to believe it in the first place. What’s more, the Ministry’s leaning heavily on the *Daily Prophet* not to report any of what they’re calling Dumbledore’s rumor-mongering, so most of the Wizarding community are completely unaware anything’s happened, and that makes them easy targets for the Death Eaters if they’re using the Imperius Curse.”

“But you’re telling people, aren’t you?” said Harry, looking around at Mr. Weasley, Sirius, Bill, Mundungus, Lupin, and Tonks. “You’re letting people know he’s back?”

They all smiled humorlessly.

“Well, as everyone thinks I’m a mad mass murderer and the Ministry’s put a ten-thousand-Galleon price on my head, I can hardly stroll up the street and start handing out leaflets, can I?” said Sirius

restlessly.

“And I’m not a very popular dinner guest with most of the community,” said Lupin. “It’s an occupational hazard of being a werewolf.”

“Tonks and Arthur would lose their jobs at the Ministry if they started shooting their mouths off,” said Sirius, “and it’s very important for us to have spies inside the Ministry, because you can bet Voldemort will have them.”

“We’ve managed to convince a couple of people, though,” said Mr. Weasley. “Tonks here, for one — she’s too young to have been in the Order of the Phoenix last time, and having Aurors on our side is a huge advantage — Kingsley Shacklebolt’s been a real asset too. He’s in charge of the hunt for Sirius, so he’s been feeding the Ministry information that Sirius is in Tibet.”

“But if none of you’s putting the news out that Voldemort’s back —” Harry began.

“Who said none of us was putting the news out?” said Sirius. “Why d’you think Dumbledore’s in such trouble?”

“What d’you mean?” Harry asked.

“They’re trying to discredit him,” said Lupin. “Didn’t you see the *Daily Prophet* last week? They reported that he’d been voted out of the Chairmanship of the International Confederation of Wizards because he’s getting old and losing his grip, but it’s not true, he was voted out by Ministry wizards after he made a speech announcing Voldemort’s return. They’ve demoted him from Chief Warlock on the Wizengamot — that’s the Wizard High Court — and they’re talking about taking away his Order of Merlin, First Class, too.”

“But Dumbledore says he doesn’t care what they do as long as they don’t take him off the Chocolate Frog cards,” said Bill, grinning.

“It’s no laughing matter,” said Mr. Weasley shortly. “If he carries on defying the Ministry like this, he could end up in Azkaban and the last thing we want is Dumbledore locked up. While You-Know-Who knows Dumbledore’s out there and wise to what he’s up to, he’s going to go cautiously for a while. If Dumbledore’s out of the way — well, You-Know-Who will have a clear field.”

“But if Voldemort’s trying to recruit more Death Eaters, it’s bound to get out that he’s come back, isn’t it?” asked Harry desperately.

“Voldemort doesn’t march up to people’s houses and bang on their front doors, Harry,” said Sirius. “He tricks, jinxes, and blackmails them. He’s well-practiced at operating in secrecy. In any case, gathering followers is only one thing he’s interested in, he’s got other plans too, plans he can put into operation very quietly indeed, and he’s concentrating on them at the moment.”

“What’s he after apart from followers?” Harry asked swiftly.

He thought he saw Sirius and Lupin exchange the most fleeting of looks before Sirius said, “Stuff he can only get by stealth.”

When Harry continued to look puzzled, Sirius said, “Like a weapon. Something he didn’t have last time.”

“When he was powerful before?”

“Yes.”

“Like what kind of weapon?” said Harry. “Something worse than the *Avada Kedavra* — ?”

“That’s enough.”

Mrs. Weasley spoke from the shadows beside the door. Harry had

not noticed her return from taking Ginny upstairs. Her arms were crossed and she looked furious.

“I want you in bed, now. All of you,” she added, looking around at Fred, George, Ron, and Hermione.

“You can’t boss us —” Fred began.

“Watch me,” snarled Mrs. Weasley. She was trembling slightly as she looked at Sirius. “You’ve given Harry plenty of information. Any more and you might just as well induct him into the Order straightaway.”

“Why not?” said Harry quickly. “I’ll join, I want to join, I want to fight —”

“No.”

It was not Mrs. Weasley who spoke this time, but Lupin.

“The Order is comprised only of overage wizards,” he said. “Wizards who have left school,” he added, as Fred and George opened their mouths. “There are dangers involved of which you can have no idea, any of you. . . . I think Molly’s right, Sirius. We’ve said enough.”

Sirius half-shrugged but did not argue. Mrs. Weasley beckoned imperiously to her sons and Hermione. One by one they stood up and Harry, recognizing defeat, followed suit.

Die Orde van die Feniks

“Jou – ?”

“My liewe ou moeder, ja,” sê Sirius. “Ons probeer al ’n maand om haar af te haal, maar dit lyk of sy ’n Permanente Kleef Towerspreuk aan die agterkant van die skilderdoek geheg het. Kom ons gaan gou ondertoe voor hulle almal weer wakker word.”

“Maar wat maak ’n portret van jou ma hier?” vra Harry verwilderd terwyl hulle deur die portaal deur na ’n stel smal kliptrappe stap met die res van die geselskap agterna.

“Het niemand jou gesê nie? Dit was my ouers se huis,” sê Sirius. “Maar ek is die laaste Swardt, dus is dit nou myne. Ek het dit vir Dompeldorius as Hoofkwartier aangebied – amper die enigste nuttige ding wat ek nog gedoen het.”

Harry, wat ’n warmer verwelkoming verwag het, merk hoe hard en bitter Sirius se stem klink. Hy volg sy peetpa na die onderpunt van die trap en na ’n deur wat na die kelderkombuis lei.

Die spelonkagtige vertrek met ruwe klipmure is nie minder somber as die voorportaal bo nie. Die meeste van die lig kom van ’n groot vuur aan die oorkant van die vertrek. ’n Wolk pyprook hang in die lug sodat die dreigende vorms van swaar ysterpote en -panne wat aan die plafon hang net dofweg sigbaar is. ’n Klomp stoele is vir die vergadering in die vertrek gepak en ’n groot houttafel in die middel is besaai met rolle perkament, wynbekers, leë wynbottels en ’n bondel wat soos toingrige lappe lyk. Meneer Weasley en sy oudste seun, Bill, sit eenkant by die hoek van die tafel met hul koppe bymekaar en gesels sag.

Mevrou Weasley maak keel skoon. Haar eggenoot, ’n skraal effens bles rooikopman met ’n horingbril, kyk om en spring orent.

“Harry!” sê meneer Weasley en kom haastig nader om te groet. Hy skud Harry se hand met mening. “Goed om jou te sien!”

Harry sien oor meneer Weasley se skouer hoe Bill, wat sy lang hare nog steeds in ’n poniestert dra, die velle perkament op die tafel vinnig oprol.

"Goed gereis, Harry?" roep Bill terwyl hy probeer om twaalf rolle gelyk op te tel. "Maloog het jou nie oor Groenland laat kom nie?"

"Hy't probeer," sê Tonks. Sy stap nader om Bill hand te gee en stamp 'n kers op die laaste stuk perkament om. "O nee – jammer –"

"Hier, skat." Mevrouw Weasley klink ergerlik. Sy herstel die perkament met 'n beweging van haar towerstaf. In die ligflits van die towerspreuk kry Harry 'n glimp van iets wat soos die plan van 'n gebout lyk.

Mevrouw Weasley het hom sien kyk. Sy raap die plan van die tafel af op en prop dit in Bill se reeds oorlaaide arms.

"Hierdie goed moet dadelik aan die einde van vergaderings gegee word," snou sy voor sy wegswaai na 'n antieke kombuiskas en begin om borde uit te haal.

Bill haal sy towerstaf uit, prewel "Evanescor!" en die rolle verdwyn.

"Sit, Harry," sê Sirius. "Jy't vir Mundungus ontmoet, nê?"

Die ding wat vir Harry soos 'n bondel lappe gelyk het, gee 'n uitgetrekte, roggelende snork en skrik wakker.

"Hê ieman' my naam gesjê?" mompel Mundungus slaperig. "Ek sittem saam met Sirius..." Hy steek 'n baie vuil hand in die lug asof hy stem, sy sakkerige, bloedbelope oë uit fokus.

Gunny giggel.

"Die vergadering is oor, Dung," sê Sirius terwyl hulle almal by die tafel gaan sit. "Harry is hier."

"Hê?" Mundungus loer bedruk na Harry deur sy gekoekte bos voor hare. "Jislaaik, hy isj. Ja... isj jy oukei, Harry?"

"Ja," sê Harry.

Mundungus voetel senuagtig in sy sakke terwyl hy na Harry bly staan en haal 'n vuil swart pyp uit. Hy prop dit in sy mond, steek die punt met sy towerstaf aan en teug diep daaraan. Binne oomblikke is hy versteek agter groot walms groenerige rook.

"Sjkuld' jou 'n verskoning," grom sy stem uit die middel van die stink rookwolk.

"Vir die laaste maal, Mundungus," roep mevrouw Weasley, "sal jy asseblief nie daardie ding in die kombuis rook nie, veral nie wanneer ons binnekort gaan eet nie!"

"A," sê Mundungus. "Reg. Jammer, Molly."

Die wolk rook verdwyn toe Mundungus sy pyp terug in sy sak druk, maar die bitter reuk van brandende sokkies hang nog in die lug.

"En as julle voor middernag wil eet, het ek hulp nodig," sê mevrouw Weasley in die rondte. "Nee, jy bly net waar jy is, Harry, skat, jy't ver gereis."

“Wat kan ek doen, Molly?” vra Tonks en spring entoesiasties nader.

Mevrou Weasley huiwer. Sy lyk bekommerd.

“Hm – nee, dis alles reg, Tonks, jy’t ook rus nodig, jy’t vandag genoeg gedoen.”

“Nee, nee, ek wil help!” sê Tonks vrolik. Sy stamp ’n stoel om toe sy haastig na die kombuiskas gaan waar Ginny besig is om die messegoed uit te haal.

Kort voor lank is ’n reeks swaar messe besig om vleis en groente vanself te kap terwyl meneer Weasley toesig hou. Mevrouw Weasley roer in ’n hekseketel wat oor die vuur hang en die ander haal borde, nog wynbekers en kos uit die spens. Harry bly sit by die tafel langs Sirius en Mundungus, wat nog steeds sy oë droewig vir hom knip.

“Ou Freya onlangs gesien?” vra hy.

“Nee,” sê Harry. “Ek het niemand gesien nie.”

“Sien, ek sou nie weggegaan het nie,” sê Mundungus en leun vorentoe, sy stem pleitend, “maar daar was hierdie besigheidsgeleentheid –”

Harry skrik toe iets teen sy been skuur, maar dis net Kromskeen, Hermien se krombeengemmerkat wat hom om Harry se bene draai voor hy op Sirius se skoot spring, opkrul en begin spin. Sirius krap hom ingedagte agter die ore en kyk na Harry. Sy gesig is nog steeds grimmig.

“Het jy ’n lekker somer tot dusver gehad?”

“Nee, dit was aaklig,” sê Harry.

Vir die eerste keer flikker iets soos ’n glimlag oor Sirius se gesig.

“Weet nie waaroor jy kla nie.”

“Wat?” sê Harry ongelowig.

“Persoonlik sou ek ’n Dementor-aanval verwelkom het. ’n Dodelike stryd vir my siel sou die eentonigheid ’n bietjie gebreek het. Jy dink jōu lot is erg, maar ten minste kon jy uitkom en jou bene rek, ’n bietjie baklei . . . ek’s al vir ’n maand binne.”

“Hoekom?” vra Harry fronsend.

“Omdat die Ministerie vir Towerkuns nog steeds agter my aan is en Woldemort teen dié tyd weet ek’s ’n Animagus. Wurmstert sou vir hom vertel het. My oulike vermomming is dus nutteloos. Daar’s nie veel wat ek vir die Orde van die Feniks kan doen nie . . . of so reken Dompeldorius.”

Daar is iets aan die effens plat sterntoon waarmee Sirius Dompeldorius se naam sê wat vir Harry vertel dat Sirius ook nie baie tevrede met die Hoof is nie. Harry voel ’n skielike opwelling van toegeneentheid teenoor sy peetpa.

“In minste het jy geweet wataangaan,” sê hy om hom op te heur.

“Ja,” sê Sirius sarkasties. “Luister na Snerp se verslae en snydende skimpe dat hy daar buite sy lewe waag terwyl ek hier lekker gemaklik op my bas sit. . . vra my uit oor die skoonmakery –”

“Watter skoonmakery?” vra Harry.

“Probeer die plek so kry dat mense hierin kan woon,” sê Sirius en briede na die troostelose kombuis. “In die tien jaar sedert my liewe moeder se dood het niemand hier gebly nie, tensy jy haar ou huis-tel-tel en hy’s heeltemal getik – het jare laas skoongemaak.”

Sirius,” sê Mundungus, wat nie lyk of hy na die gesprek luister nie, maar ’n lee wynbeker bestudeer. “Is dit soliede silwer, ou maat?”

“Ja,” sê Sirius en kyk vol veragting daarna. “Beste vyftiende-eeuse silwer, gnoomvervaardig en gebosseleer met die Swardt-familiewapen.”

“Dit het afgekom,” sê Mundungus en vryf die plek met sy mou.

“Fred – George – NEE, DRA DIT NET!” skree mevrou Weasley.

Harry, Sirius en Mundungus kyk om en duik gelyk van die tafel af weg. Fred en George het ’n groot hekseketel vol bredie, ’n ysterkan vol Botterbier en ’n swaar broodbord met broodmes en al getoor om deur die lug tafel toe te vlieg. Die hekseketel skaats oor die lengte van die tafel, kom op die kant tot stilstand en laat ’n lang swart brandmerk op die houtblad agter. Die kan Botterbier tref die vloer met ’n slag en mors bier oor alles. Die broodmes glip van die broodbord af en land punt eerste, trillend, presies waar Sirius se reghand oomblikke tevore was.

“GENADE TOG!” skree mevrou Weasley. “DIT WAS REGTIG NIE! NODIG NIE! EK HET GENOEG HIERVAN GEHAD! NET OM-DAT JULLE NOU TOEGELAAT WORD OM TE TOOR, BETEKEN NIE! JULLE MOET JUL TOWERSTAWWE VIR ELKE OU DINGE-LIJIE RONDSWAAI NIE!”

“Ons het net ’n bietjie tyd probeer spaar!” sê Fred. Hy draf nader en pluk die broodmes uit die tafel. “Jammer, Sirius – het nie bedoel nie –”

Sowel Harry as Sirius lag. Mundungus, wat agteroor van sy stoel geval het, kom vloekend orent. Kromskeen sis verwoed en skiet onder die kombuiskas in waar sy groot geel oë in die donker gloei.

“Seuns,” sê meneer Weasley terwyl hy die bredie na die middel van die tafel skuif, “julle ma is reg, noudat julle meerderjarig is, is julle veronderstel om ’n sekere verantwoordelikheid –”

“Nie een van julle broers het hierdie soort moeilikheid gemaak nie!” raas mevrou Weasley voort terwyl sy ’n nuwe kan Botterbier

op die tafel neerplak en amper net soveel as tevore laat mors. "Bill het nie gevoel hy moet elke paar tree appareer nie! Charlie het nie alles wat hy raakloop, getoor nie! Percy -"

Sy bly stil, hap na asem en kyk verskrik na haar man, wie se gesig skielik uitdrukkingloos geword het.

"Kom ons eet," sê Bill vinnig.

"Dit lyk heerlik, Molly," sê Lupin. Hy begin vir almal inskep en gee die borde oor die tafel aan.

Vir 'n rukkie is dit stil afgesien van die geskuiw van stoele, die geklink van borde en messegoed soos almal aansit om te eet. Dan draai mevrou Weasley na Sirius.

"Ek wou nog vir jou sê, Sirius. Daar's iets vasgekeer in daardie skryftafel in die sitkamer. Dit ratel en skud vreeslik. Dit kan seker bloot 'n Boggart wees, maar ek het gewonder of ons vir Alastor sal vra om te kyk voor ons dit uitlaat."

"Nes jy wil," sê Sirius onverskillig.

"En die gordyne daar binne is die ene Doxies," gaan mevrou Weasley voort. "Ek het gedink ons kan môre daar begin."

"Ek sien uit daarna," sê Sirius. Harry hoor die sarkasme in sy stem, maar hy glo nie iemand anders het dit opgelet nie.

Oorkant Harry is Tonks besig om vir Hermien en Ginny te vermaak deur haar neus ná elke mond vol kos te verander. Sy trek haar oë op skrefies met dieselfde gepynigde uitdrukking as in Harry se slaapkamer. Haar neus swel om die beurt tot 'n tamaai snawel soos Snerp s'n, krimp tot die grootte van 'n knopiesampioen of laat bosse hare uit elke neusgat hang. Skynbaar is dit 'n gereelde vorm van vermaak aan die eettafel, want Hermien en Ginny versoek hul gunstelingneuse.

"Doen daai een wat soos 'n varksnoet lyk, Tonks!" giggel Ginny.

Tonks doen dit en toe Harry opkyk, voel dit vir 'n vlietende oomblik of 'n vroulike Dudley van oorkant die tafel vir hom grinnik.

Meneer Weasley, Bill en Lupin is in 'n gesprek oor gnome gewikkel.

"Hulle laat niks blyk nie," sê Bill. "Ek kan nog steeds nie agterkom of hulle glo hy's terug of nie. Dit kan natuurlik wees dat hulle eerder nie wil kant kies nie. Dat hulle hulle uit alles probeer hou."

"Ek is seker hulle sal nooit oorloop na Jy-Weet-Wie nie," sê meneer Weasley en skud sy kop. "Hulle het ook verliese gely. Lupin, onthou jy daardie gnoomgesin daar iewers by Nottingham wat hy die vorige keer vermoor het?"

"Ek dink dit hang af wat jy hulle aanbied," sê Lupin. "En ek praat nie nou van goud nie. As hulle die vryhede aangebied word wat ons

hulle al vir eeue ontsê, sal die versoeking baie groot wees. Kon jy nog steeds niks met Ragnok uitrig nie, Bill?"

"Hy's op die oomblik taamlik antitowenaar," sê Bill. "Hy't nog nie ophou raas oor die Bagman-besigheid nie. Hy reken die Ministerie het dit toegesmeer, daardie gnome het nie by hom goud gekry nie, julle weet mos –"

In Dawerende gelag aan die middel van die tafel verdoof die res van Bill se woorde. Fred, George, Ron en Mundungus hou hul mae vas.

"En toe," stik Mundungus terwyl trane oor sy wange loop, "en toe, julle sal my nie glo nie, toe sê hy vir my, hy sê: 'Hoor hier, Dung, waart' jy al daai paddas gekry? Want die een of ander seun van 'n Moker het al myne gesteel!' En ek sê: 'Al jou paddas gesteel, Will, wraggies? En nou wil jy nog hê?' En wil julle my glo, seuns, die dom söt koop al sy eie paddas terug by my vir baie meer as wat hy die eerste keer betaal het –"

"Ek dink nie ons wil nog van jou saketransaksies hoor nie, dankie, Mundungus," sê mevrou Weasley skerp terwyl Ron gillend van die lag vooroor op die tafel val.

"Jammer, Molly," sê Mundungus dadelik. Hy vee sy oë af en knip-oog vir Harry. "Maar weet jy, Will het hulle by Vratte Harris gesteel, dus het ek nie regtig iets verkeerds gedoen nie."

"Ek weet nie waar jy oor reg en verkeerd geleer het nie, Mundungus, maar ek dink jy't 'n paar belangrike lesse gemis," sê mevrou Weasley kil.

Ron en Fred steek hul gesigte in hul bekere Botterbier weg. George het begin hik. Om 'n rede wat Harry nie kan begryp nie, gee mevrou Weasley vir Sirius 'n baie nare kyk voor sy opstaan en 'n groot rabarberkrummelkoek vir poeding gaan haal. Harry kyk om na sy peetpa.

"Molly keur nie vir Mundungus goed nie," sê Sirius onderlangs.

"Hoekom is hy in die Orde?" vra Harry baie sag.

"Hy's nuttig," mompel Sirius. "Ken al die skelms – wel, hy kan nie eintlik anders nie, hy's self een. Maar hy's ook baie lojaal teenoor Dompeldorius, wat hom eenkeer uit die knyp gered het. Dis die moeite werd om iemand soos Dung in die rondte te hê. Hy hoor goed wat ons nie hoor nie. Maar Molly dink dis onnodig om hom vir aandete te nooi. Sy't hom nog nie vergewe dat hy weggeglip het toe hy jou moes volg nie."

Drie porsies rabarberkrummelkoek en vla later en Harry se jeans voel ongemaklik styf – wat nogal 'n prestasie is, want die jeans was eers Dudley s'n.

Toe Harry sy lepel neersit, heers daar vir 'n oomblik stilte: meneer

Weasley leun agteroor in sy stoel en lyk versadig en ontspanne; Tonks gaap oopmond, haar neus is nou weer normaal; en Ginny, wat vir Kromskeen onder die kas uitgelok het, rol Botterbierkurkproppe oor die vloer wat hy dan jaag.

“Amper slaapyd, dink ek,” sê mevrou Weasley en gaap.

“Nog nie heeltemal nie, Molly,” sê Sirius. Hy stoot sy leë bord terug en kyk na Harry. “Weet jy, jy verbaas my. Ek het gedink die eerste ding wat jy gaan doen as jy hier aankom, is om vrae oor Woldemort te vra.”

Die atmosfeer in die vertrek verander met die spoed wat Harry met die aankoms van Dementors assosieer. Waar dit oomblikke gelede slaperig en ontspanne was, is dit nou wawyd wakker, selfs gespanne. By die noem van Woldemort se naam het ’n rilling om die tafel gegaan. Lupin, wat op die punt was om ’n sluk wyn te neem, laat sak sy wynebeker stadig en lyk behoedsaam.

“Ek het!” sê Harry verontwaardig. “Ek het vir Ron en Hermien gevra, maar hulle sê ons word nie in die Orde toegelaat nie en –”

“En hulle is heeltemal reg,” sê mevrou Weasley. “Julle is te jonk.”

Sy sit penorent in haar stoel, haar vuiste gebal op die armleunings en sonder enige teken van lomerigheid.

“Van wanneer af moet iemand aan die Orde van die Feniks behoort om vrae te mag vra?” sê Sirius. “Harry was vir ’n maand vasgekeer in daardie Moggel-huis. Hy’t die reg om te weet wat aangaan –”

“Wag ’n bietjie!” val George hom hard in die rede.

“Hoekom kan Harry se vrae beantwoord word?” sê Fred vererg.

“Ons probeer al ’n maand lank om iets uit julle te kry en julle’t nog nie hoe of ba gesê nie!” sê George.

“Julle is te jonk om aan die Orde te behoort,” sê Fred in ’n hoë stem wat onheilspellend baie soos sy ma s’n klink. “En Harry is nog nie eens meerderjarig nie!”

“Dis nie my skuld dat julle nie weet wat in die Orde aangaan nie,” sê Sirius bedaard, “dis jul ouers se besluit. Harry, aan die ander kant, is –”

“Dis nie vir jou om te besluit wat goed is vir Harry nie!” sê mevrou Weasley skerp. Die uitdrukking op haar gewoonlik gemoedlike gesig lyk gevaarlik. “Jy’t seker nie vergeet wat Dompeldorius gesê het nie, nè?”

“Watter deel?” vra Sirius beleef, maar met die houding van ’n man wat hom regmaak om te baklei.

“Die deel oor Harry wat nie meer moet weet as wat nodig is nie,” sê mevrou Weasley met ekstra klem op die laaste vyf woorde.

Ron, Hermien, Fred en George se koppe swaai van Sirius na mevrou Weasley asof hulle 'n tenniswedstryd volg. Ginny, wat langs kromskeen tussen 'n hoop kurkproppe hurk, volg die gesprek oopmond. Lupin se oë is vasgenaël op Sirius.

"Ek is nie van plan om meer te sê as wat nodig is nie, Molly," sê Sirius. "Maar aangesien dit hy is wat vir Woldemort sien terugkom het," (weer gaan 'n kollektiewe siddering om die tafel by die noem van die naam) "het hy meer reg as die meeste van ons om –"

"Hy's nie 'n lid van die Orde van die Feniks nie!" sê mevrou Weasley. "Hy's net vyftien en –"

"En hy't reeds met net soveel te doen gekry as die meeste van die lede van die Orde," sê Sirius, "en meer as party."

"Niemand probeer ontken wat hy gedoen het nie," sê mevrou Weasley in 'n skril stem terwyl haar vuiste op haar stoel se armleunings bewe. "Maar hy's nog –"

"Hy's nie 'n kind nie!" sê Sirius ongeduldig.

"Hy's ook nie 'n volwassene nie!" sê mevrou Weasley en haar gesig word rooi. "Hy's nie James nie, Sirius!"

"Ek het heeltemal duidelikheid oor wie hy is, dankie, Molly," sê Sirius koud.

"Ek is nie so seker nie!" sê mevrou Weasley. "Soms klink dit aan die manier waarop jy van hom praat asof jy dink jy't jou beste vriend teruggekry!"

"Wat's verkeerd daarmee?" vra Harry.

"Wat verkeerd is, Harry, is dat jy *nie* jou pa is nie, hoe baie jy ook al na hom mag lyk!" sê mevrou Weasley, wie se oë nog steeds in Sirius se n' boor. "Jy's nog steeds op skool en die volwassenes wat vir jou verantwoordelik is, moet dit nie vergeet nie!"

"Bedoel jy daarmee dat ek 'n onverantwoordelike peetpa is?" styg Sirius se stem.

"Wat ek bedoel, is dat jy daarvoor bekend is dat jy soms oorhaastig optree, Sirius. Wat ook die rede is hoekom Dompeldorius jou steeds maan om in die huis te bly en –"

"Ons sal my opdragte van Dompeldorius hier uitlaat, as jy nie omgee nie!" sê Sirius hard.

"Arthur!" sê mevrou Weasley kwaai vir haar man. "Arthur, gaan jy my nie ondersteun nie?"

Meneer Weasley antwoord nie dadelik nie. Hy haal sy bril af en maak dit stadig met sy kleed skoon, maar kyk nie na sy vrou nie. Eers toe hy dit versigtig op sy neus teruggesit het, antwoord hy.

"Dompeldorius weet die posisie het verander, Molly. Hy aan-

vaar dat Harry sekere dinge moet weet noudat hy hier is."

"Ja, maar daar's 'n verskil tussen *dit* en om hom te nooi om te vra net wat hy wil!"

"Persoonlik," sê Lupin sag en kyk van Sirius na mevrou Weasley, wat vinnig na hom draai in die hoop dat sy uiteindelik 'n bondgenoot gaan hê, "dink ek dis beter as Harry die feite – nie al die feite nie, Molly, maar die algemene prentjie – by ons hoor voor hy 'n verwronge weergawe elders kry."

Sy gesigsuitdrukking is goedig, maar Harry kry die gevoel dat Lupin sterk vermoed dat sommige van die Verlengbare Ore mevrou Weasley se strooptog oorleef het.

"Wel," sê mevrou Weasley terwyl sy swaar asemhaal en om die tafel kyk op soek na ondersteuning wat nie daar is nie, "wel ek sien ek is uitgestem. Ek volstaan hiermee: Dompeldorius het sy redes hoekom hy nie wil hê dat Harry te veel weet nie, en as iemand wat Harry se belange op die hart dra, voel ek –"

"Hy's nie jou seun nie," sê Sirius sag.

"Hy's net so goed as," sê mevrou Weasley verwoed. "Wie anders het hy?"

"Hy het vir my!"

"Ja," sê mevrou Weasley en haar lip krul, "die ding is net dit was 'n bietjie moeilik vir jou om na hom te kyk terwyl jy in Azkaban opgesluit was, of hoe?"

Sirius kom orent uit sy stoel.

"Molly, jy's nie die enigste mens om hierdie tafel wat vir Harry omgee nie," sê Lupin skerp. "Sirius, sit!"

Mevrou Weasley se onderlip bewe. Sirius sink stadig terug op sy stoel, sy gesig wit.

"Ek dink Harry behoort 'n sê in die saak te hê," gaan Lupin voort. "Hy's oud genoeg om vir homself te besluit."

"Ek wil weet wat aangaan," sê Harry dadelik.

Hy kyk nie na mevrou Weasley nie. Hy voel geroer deur wat sy gesê het, dat hy so goed soos haar seun is, maar hy is ook moeg vir haar gepamperlang. Sirius is reg. Hy is nie 'n kind nie.

"Goed dan," sê mevrou Weasley en haar stem breek. "Ginny – Ron – Hermien – Fred – George – uit hierdie kombuis, dadelik."

Daar is 'n onmiddellike oproer.

"Ons is meerderjarig!" skree Fred en George gelyk.

"As Harry mag, hoekom mag ek nie?" skree Ron.

"Ma, ek wil hoor!" kerm Ginny.

"NEE!" skree mevrou Weasley en kom orent, haar oë baie blink. "Ek verbied dit absoluut –"

"Molly, jy kan nie vir Fred en George keer nie," sê meneer Weasley moeg. "Hulle is meerderjarig."

"Hulle is nog op skool."

"Maar wetlik is hulle nou volwassenes," sê meneer Weasley in die selfde moeë stem.

Mevrou Weasley se gesig is bloedrooi.

"Ek – o, goed dan, Fred en George, julle kan bly, maar Ron –"

"Harry sal in elk geval vir my en Hermien alles vertel wat julle sê!" sê Ron kwaai. "Jy sal mos, Harry?" voeg hy onseker by toe hy Harry se oë ontmoet.

Vir 'n oomblik oorweeg Harry dit om vir Ron te sê hy sal hom nie in enkele woord vertel nie, sodat hy kan agterkom hoe dit voel om in die duister gehou te word. Maar die gemene impuls wyk toe hulle na mekaar kyk.

"Natuurlik sal ek," sê Harry.

Ron en Hermien straal.

"Goed!" skree mevrou Weasley. "Goed! Ginny – BED TOE!"

Ginny gaan nie sonder om haar tee te sit nie. Hulle hoor hoe sy die hele ent met die trappe op met haar ma stry en toe sy in die voorportaal kom, vererger mevrou Swardt se krete die kabaal. Lupin gaan haastig uit om die portret tot bedaring te bring. Dis eers ná hy teruggekom het en weer by die tafel sit, dat Sirius praat.

"Oukei, Harry . . . wat wil jy weet?"

Harry trek sy asem diep in en vra uiteindelik die vraag waaroor hy al die afgelope maand wonder.

"Waar is Woldemort?" sê hy en ignoreer die hernude sidderings en rillings wat op die naam volg. "Wat doen hy? Ek het die Moggels se nuus probeer kyk, maar daar was niks wat soos iets oor hom ge-lyk het nie, geen snaakse sterftes of niks nie."

"Dis omdat daar nog geen snaakse sterftes was nie," sê Sirius. "In elk geval, nie waarvan ons weet nie . . . en ons weet nogal baie."

"Meer as wat hy dink," sê Lupin.

"Hoekom het hy opgehou om mense dood te maak?" vra Harry. Hy weet dat Woldemort die vorige jaar meer as een keer moord gepleeg het.

"Omdat hy nie die aandag op homself wil vestig nie," sê Sirius. "Dit sal gevaarlik wees. Sy terugkoms het nie afgeloop soos hy dit beplan het nie, sien. Hy't dit opgemors."

"Of liever, jy't dit vir hom opgemors," sê Lupin met 'n tevrede glimlaggie.

"Hoe?" vra Harry verward.

"Jy was nie veronderstel om dit te oorleef nie!" sê Sirius. "Nie-

mand behalwe sy Doodseters was veronderstel om te weet hy's terug nie. Maar 'n ooggetuie het dit oorleef."

"En die laaste persoon wat hy wou hê moet weet hy's terug, is Dompeldorius," sê Lupin. "En jy't gesorg dat Dompeldorius dit dadelik hoor."

"Hoe het dit gehelp?" vra Harry.

"Jy speel seker," sê Bill ongelowig. "Dompeldorius is die enigste towenaar vir wie Jy-Weet-Wie nog ooit bang was!"

"Danksy jou kon Dompeldorius die Orde van die Feniks binne 'n uur na Woldemort se terugkeer bymekaarroep," sê Sirius.

"So wat doen die Orde nou eintlik?" sê Harry en kyk na die gesigte om hom.

"Werk so hard soos ons kan om seker te maak dat Woldemort nie sy planne uitvoer nie," sê Sirius.

"Hoe weet julle wat sy planne is?" vra Harry vinnig.

"Dompeldorius het 'n goeie idee," sê Lupin, "en Dompeldorius se goeie idees is gewoonlik redelik korrek."

"Wat dink Dompeldorius is hy besig om te beplan?"

"Wel, eerstens wil hy weer sy magte opbou," sê Sirius. "In die ou tyd het hy groot getalle onder sy bevel gehad: hekse en towenaars wat hy geboelie of getoor het om hom te volg, sy getroue Doodseters, en 'n groot verskeidenheid Donker kreature. Jy't self gehoor hy beplan om die reuse te werf. Wel, hulle is net een van die groepe waarin hy belangstel. Hy sal die Ministerie vir Towerkuns beslis nie met net 'n dosyn Doodseters probeer takel nie."

"Dan probeer julle keer dat hy nog volgelinge kry?"

"Ons doen ons bes," sê Lupin.

"Hoe?"

"Wel, die belangrikste ding is om soveel mense moontlik te oortuig dat Jy-Weet-Wie werklik terug is. Om hulle op hul hoede te kry," sê Bill. "Dis nie so maklik nie."

"Hoekom nie?"

"Weens die Ministerie se houding," sê Tonks. "Jy't self vir Cornelius Broddelwerk gesien ná Jy-Weet-Wie se terugkoms, Harry. Wel, hy't nog nie van standpunt verander nie. Hy weier absoluut om te glo wat aan die gang is."

"Maar hoekom?" vra Harry wanhopig. "Hoekom is hy so onnosel? As Dompeldorius –"

"A, wel, daar sit die knoop," sê meneer Weasley met 'n wrang glimlag. "Dompeldorius."

"Broddelwerk is bang vir hom, sien," sê Tonks stroef.

"Bang vir Dompeldorius?"

“Bang vir waarmee hy besig is,” sê meneer Weasley. “Broddelwerk dink Dompeldorius maak planne om hom omver te werp. Hy dink Dompeldorius wil Minister vir Towerkuns wees.”

“Maar Dompeldorius wil nie –”

“Natuurlik wil hy nie,” sê meneer Weasley. “Hy wou nog nooit die Minister se werk gehad het nie, hoewel baie mense ná Millicent Bagnold se aftrede wou hê hy moet dit doen. Broddelwerk het die pos gekry, maar hy’t nooit vergeet hoeveel populêre aanhang Dompeldorius gehad het nie, hoewel Dompeldorius nooit eens vir die werk aansoek gedoen het nie.”

“Diep binne weet Broddelwerk dat Dompeldorius baie slimmer en ook ’n baie kragtiger towenaar as hy is. Toe hy pas tot die Ministerie toegetree het, het hy gedurig Dompeldorius se raad en hulp gevra,” sê Lupin. “Maar dis of hy ’n soort magshonger ontwikkel het en nou ook baie meer vol vertroue is. Hy geniet dit om Minister vir Towerkuns te wees en dit lyk of hy homself oortuig het dat hy die een met die verstand is en Dompeldorius die opstoker.”

“Hoe kan hy dit wil dink?” sê Harry ergerlik. “Hoe kan hy dink dat Dompeldorius alles sommer net sal opmaak – dat ek alles opgemaak het?”

“Want sodra hy aanvaar dat Woldemort terug is, beteken dit moeilikheid vir die Ministerie soos hulle veertien jaar laas gehad het,” sê Sirius bitter. “Broddelwerk kan homself net nie sover bring om dit te aanvaar nie. Dis baie makliker om vir homself te sê dat Dompeldorius lieg en hom uit die stoel wil lig.”

“Sien jy die probleem?” sê Lupin. “Terwyl die Ministerie volhou dat daar niks is om te vrees nie, is dit moeilik om mense te oortuig dat Woldemort terug is, veral omdat hulle dit in die eerste plek nie regtig wil glo nie. Wat meer is, die Ministerie leun swaar op die *Daaglikse Profeet* om nie verslag te doen oor wat hulle Dompeldorius se gerug strooiery noem nie. Dus is die grootste gedeelte van die towenaarsgemeenskap salig onbewus van wat aangaan en dit maak hulle maklike teikens vir die Doodseters. Hulle hoef bloot die Imperius-vloek te gebruik.”

“Maar julle vertel vir mense, of hoe?” vra Harry. Hy kyk na meneer Weasley, Sirius, Bill, Mundungus, Lupin en Tonks. “Julle sê vir die mense hy’s terug?”

Hulle glimlag sonder enige humor.

“Wel, aangesien almal dink ek is ’n mal massamoordenaar en die Ministerie tienduuisend Galjoene op my kop geplaas het, kan ek nie eintlik in die strate rondloop en pamfletjies uitdeel nie, kan ek?” sê Sirius rusteloos.

“En ek is nie ’n besonder gewilde gasspreker by die grootste ge-

deelte van die gemeenskap nie,” sê Lupin. “Om ’n weerwolf te wees, is ietwat van ’n loopbaanbelenmering.”

“Tonks en Arthur sal hul werk by die Ministerie verloor as hulle te veel praat,” sê Sirius, “en dis baie belangrik dat ons spioene binne die Ministerie het, want jy kan wed Woldemort het.”

“Ons het darem ’n paar mense oortuig,” sê meneer Weasley. “Tonks hier, is een – sy’s te joek om die vorige keer aan die Orde van die Feniks te kon behoort en dis ’n groot voordeel om Aurors aan ons kant te hê. Kingsley Shacklebolt is ook ’n yslike bate. Hy’s aan die hoof van die poging om Sirius te vang en hy voer die Minister inligting dat Sirius in Tibet is.”

“Maar as niemand van julle die tyding dat Woldemort terug is, kan versprei nie –” begin Harry.

“Wie sê niemand versprei die tyding nie?” sê Sirius. “Hoekom dink jy is Dompeldorius so dier in die sop?”

“Wat bedoel jy?”

“Hulle probeer hom diskrediteer,” sê Lupin. “Het jy nie verlede week se *Daaglikse Profeet* gesien nie? Hulle het gerapporteer hy’s uitgestem as voorsitter van die Internasionale Konfederasie van Towenaars omdat hy oud word en tred met die werklikheid verloor, maar dis nie waar nie. Hy’s deur die Ministerie se towenaars uitgestem nadat hy Woldemort se terugkoms in sy toespraak aangekondig het. Hulle het hom sy rang as Hoofowenaar vir die Towenaarshoërhof ontnem en daar is sprake dat hy sy Orde van Merlin, Eerste Klas ook gaan verloor.”

“Maar Dompeldorius sê hy geë nie om wat hulle doen nie, solank hulle hom net nie van die Sjokoladepaddakaart afhaal nie,” sê Bill met ’n grinnik.

“Dis nie snaaks nie,” sê meneer Weasley skerp. “As hy voortgaan om die Ministerie op hierdie manier te tart, sal hy in Azkaban beland en dis die laaste ding wat ons kan bekostig. Solank Jy-Weet-Wie weet Dompeldorius is vry en weet waarmee hy besig is, sal hy versigtig wees. Met Dompeldorus uit die weg geruim – wel, Jy-Weet-Wie se pad sal oop voor hom lê.”

“Maar as Woldemort nog Doodseters probeer werf, sal dit mos uitkom dat hy terug is, of hoe?” vra Harry wanhopig.

“Woldemort marsjeer nie na mense se huise en klop aan hul voordeure nie, Harry,” sê Sirius. Hy kul, toor en pers hulle af. Hy’s geoef in geheimhouding. In elk geval, om volgelingen bymekaar te maak, is maar een ding waarin hy geïnteresseerd is. Hy’t ook ander planne wat hy stil-stil aan die gang kan kry en waarop hy op die oomblik konsentreer.”

"Wat soek hy nog behalwe volgelinge?" vra Harry vinnig. Hy verbeel hom hy sien hoe Sirius en Lupin vlugtig na mekaar kyk voor Sirius antwoord.

"Goed wat hy net in die geheim kan kry"

Toe Harry nog steeds verward lyk, sê Sirius: "Soos 'n wapen. Iets wat hy nie die vorige keer gehad het nie."

"Toe hy laas magtig was?"

"Ja."

"Watter soort wapen?" sê Harry. "Iets ergers as die Avada Kedavra?"

"Dis genoeg!"

Mevrou Weasley praat uit die skaduwees langs die deur. Harry het nie opgelet dat sy terug is nadat sy vir Ginny boontoe geneem het nie. Haar arms is oor haar bors gevou en sy lyk briesend.

"Julle gaan dadelik bed toe. Almal van julle," voeg sy by en gluur na Fred, George, Ron en Hermien.

"Ma kan ons nie rond –" begin Fred.

"O, ek kan nie?" snou mevrou Weasley. Sy gluur Sirius aan. "Jy't vir Harry oorgenoeg inligting gegee. Nog meer en jy kan hom net sowel onmiddellik by die Orde inlyf."

"Kan hy?" vra Harry gretig. "Ek sal aansluit, ek wil aansluit, ek wil veg."

"Nee."

Dis nie mevrou Weasley nie, maar Lupin wat antwoord.

"Die Orde bestaan slegs uit meerderjarige towenaars. Towenaars wat reeds uit die skool is," voeg hy by toe Fred en George se monde oopgaan. "Daar is gevare wat julle julle nie kan voorstel nie, nie een van julle nie. Molly is reg, Sirius. Ons het genoeg gesê."

Sirius haal sy skouers effens op, maar stry nie. Mevrou Weasley beduie kwaai vir haar seuns en Hermien. Hulle staan een vir een op en Harry, wat besef dat hulle verloor het, stap agterna.

CHAPTER SIX



THE NOBLE AND MOST ANCIENT HOUSE OF BLACK

Mrs. Weasley followed them upstairs looking grim. “I want you all to go straight to bed, no talking,” she said as they reached the first landing. “We’ve got a busy day tomorrow. I expect Ginny’s asleep,” she added to Hermione, “so try not to wake her up.”

“Asleep, yeah, right,” said Fred in an undertone, after Hermione bade them good night and they were climbing to the next floor. “If Ginny’s not lying awake waiting for Hermione to tell her everything they said downstairs, then I’m a flobberworm . . .”

“All right, Ron, Harry,” said Mrs. Weasley on the second landing, pointing them into their bedroom. “Off to bed with you.”

“Night,” Harry and Ron said to the twins.

“Sleep tight,” said Fred, winking.

Mrs. Weasley closed the door behind Harry with a sharp snap. The bedroom looked, if anything, even danker and gloomier than it had on first sight. The blank picture on the wall was now breathing very slowly and deeply, as though its invisible occupant was asleep. Harry put on his pajamas, took off his glasses, and climbed into his chilly bed while Ron threw Owl Treats up on top of the wardrobe to pacify Hedwig and Pigwidgeon, who were clattering around and rustling their wings restlessly.

“We can’t let them out to hunt every night,” Ron explained as he pulled on his maroon pajamas. “Dumbledore doesn’t want too many owls swooping around the square, thinks it’ll look suspicious. Oh yeah . . . I forgot . . .”

He crossed to the door and bolted it.

“What’re you doing that for?”

“Kreacher,” said Ron as he turned off the light. “First night I was here he came wandering in at three in the morning. Trust me, you don’t want to wake up and find him prowling around your room. Anyway . . .” He got into his bed, settled down under the covers, then turned to look at Harry in the darkness. Harry could see his outline by the moonlight filtering in through the grimy window. “*What d’you reckon?*”

Harry didn’t need to ask what Ron meant.

“Well, they didn’t tell us, much we couldn’t have guessed, did they?” he said, thinking of all that had been said downstairs. “I mean, all they’ve really said is that the Order’s trying to stop people joining

Vol —”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Ron.

“— *demort*,” said Harry firmly. “When are you going to start using his name? Sirius and Lupin do.”

Ron ignored this last comment. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said. “We already knew nearly everything they told us, from using the Extendable Ears. The only new bit was —”

Crack.

“OUCH!”

“Keep your voice down, Ron, or Mum’ll be back up here.”

“You two just Apparated on my knees!”

“Yeah, well, it’s harder in the dark —”

Harry saw the blurred outlines of Fred and George leaping down from Ron’s bed. There was a groan of bedsprings and Harry’s mattress descended a few inches as George sat down near his feet.

“So, got there yet?” said George eagerly.

“The weapon Sirius mentioned?” said Harry.

“Let slip, more like,” said Fred with relish, now sitting next to Ron. “We didn’t hear about *that* on the old Extendables, did we?”

“What d’you reckon it is?” said Harry.

“Could be anything,” said Fred.

“But there can’t be anything worse than the *Avada Kedavra* curse, can there?” said Ron. “What’s worse than death?”

“Maybe it’s something that can kill loads of people at once,” suggested George.

“Maybe it’s some particularly painful way of killing people,” said

Ron fearfully.

“He’s got the Cruciatus Curse for causing pain,” said Harry. “He doesn’t need anything more efficient than that.”

There was a pause and Harry knew that the others, like him, were wondering what horrors this weapon could perpetrate.

“So who d’you think’s got it now?” asked George.

“I hope it’s our side,” said Ron, sounding slightly nervous.

“If it is, Dumbledore’s probably keeping it,” said Fred.

“Where?” said Ron quickly. “Hogwarts?”

“Bet it is!” said George. “That’s where he hid the Sorcerer’s Stone!”

“A weapon’s going to be a lot bigger than the Stone, though!” said Ron.

“Not necessarily,” said Fred.

“Yeah, size is no guarantee of power,” said George. “Look at Ginny.”

“What d’you mean?” said Harry.

“You’ve never been on the receiving end of one of her Bat-Bogey Hexes, have you?”

“Shhh!” said Fred, half-rising from the bed. “Listen!”

They fell silent. Footsteps were coming up the stairs again.

“Mum,” said George, and without further ado there was a loud crack and Harry felt the weight vanish from the end of his bed. A few seconds later and they heard the floorboard creak outside their door; Mrs. Weasley was plainly listening to see whether they were talking or not.

Hedwig and Pigwidgeon hooted dolefully. The floorboard creaked again and they heard her heading upstairs to check on Fred and George.

“She doesn’t trust us at all, you know,” said Ron regretfully.

Harry was sure he would not be able to fall asleep; the evening had been so packed with things to think about that he fully expected to lie awake for hours mulling it all over. He wanted to continue talking to Ron, but Mrs. Weasley was now creaking back downstairs again, and once she had gone he distinctly heard others making their way upstairs . . . In fact, many-legged creatures were cantering softly up and down outside the bedroom door, and Hagrid, the Care of Magical Creatures teacher, was saying, “*Beauties, aren’ they, eh, Harry? We’ll be studyin’ weapons this term . . .*” And Harry saw that the creatures had cannons for heads and were wheeling to face him. . . . He ducked. . . .

The next thing he knew, he was curled in a warm ball under his bedclothes, and George’s loud voice was filling the room.

“Mum says get up, your breakfast is in the kitchen and then she needs you in the drawing room, there are loads more doxies than she thought and she’s found a nest of dead puffskeins under the sofa.”

Half an hour later, Harry and Ron, who had dressed and breakfasted quickly, entered the drawing room, a long, high-ceilinged room on the first floor with olive-green walls covered in dirty tapestries. The carpet exhaled little clouds of dust every time someone put their foot on it and the long, moss-green velvet curtains were buzzing as though swarming with invisible bees. It was around these that Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, Ginny, Fred, and George were

grouped, all looking rather peculiar, as they had tied cloths over their noses and mouths. Each of them was also holding a large bottle of black liquid with a nozzle at the end.

“Cover your faces and take a spray,” Mrs. Weasley said to Harry and Ron the moment she saw them, pointing to two more bottles of black liquid standing on a spindle-legged table. “It’s Doxycide. I’ve never seen an infestation this bad — *what* that house-elf’s been doing for the last ten years —”

Hermione’s face was half concealed by a tea towel but Harry distinctly saw her throw a reproachful look at Mrs. Weasley at these words.

“Kreacher’s really old, he probably couldn’t manage —”

“You’d be surprised what Kreacher can manage when he wants to, Hermione,” said Sirius, who had just entered the room carrying a bloodstained bag of what appeared to be dead rats. “I’ve just been feeding Buckbeak,” he added, in reply to Harry’s inquiring look. “I keep him upstairs in my mother’s bedroom. Anyway . . . this writing desk . . .”

He dropped the bag of rats onto an armchair, then bent over to examine the locked cabinet which, Harry now noticed for the first time, was shaking slightly.

“Well, Molly, I’m pretty sure this is a boggart,” said Sirius, peering through the keyhole, “but perhaps we ought to let Mad-Eye have a shifty at it before we let it out — knowing my mother it could be something much worse.”

“Right you are, Sirius,” said Mrs. Weasley.

They were both speaking in carefully light, polite voices that told

Harry quite plainly that neither had forgotten their disagreement of the night before.

A loud, clanging bell sounded from downstairs, followed at once by the cacophony of screams and wails that had been triggered the previous night by Tonks knocking over the umbrella stand.

"I keep telling them not to ring the doorbell!" said Sirius exasperatedly, hurrying back out of the room. They heard him thundering down the stairs as Mrs. Black's screeches echoed up through the house once more: "*Stains of dishonor, filthy half-breeds, blood traitors, children of filth...*"

"Close the door, please, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley.

Harry took as much time as he dared to close the drawing room door; he wanted to listen to what was going on downstairs. Sirius had obviously managed to shut the curtains over his mother's portrait because she had stopped screaming. He heard Sirius walking down the hall, then the clattering of the chain on the front door, and then a deep voice he recognized as Kingsley Shacklebolt's saying, "Hestia's just relieved me, so she's got Moody's cloak now, thought I'd leave a report for Dumbledore..."

Feeling Mrs. Weasley's eyes on the back of his head, Harry regretfully closed the drawing room door and rejoined the doxy party.

Mrs. Weasley was bending over to check the page on doxies in *Gilderoy Lockhart's Guide to Household Pests*, which was lying open on the sofa.

"Right, you lot, you need to be careful, because doxies bite and their teeth are poisonous. I've got a bottle of antidote here, but I'd

rather nobody needed it.”

She straightened up, positioned herself squarely in front of the curtains, and beckoned them all forward.

“When I say the word, start spraying immediately,” she said. “They’ll come flying out at us, I expect, but it says on the sprays one good squirt will paralyze them. When they’re immobilized, just throw them in this bucket.”

She stepped carefully out of their line of fire and raised her own spray. “All right — *squirt!*”

Harry had been spraying only a few seconds when a fully grown doxy came soaring out of a fold in the material, shiny beetlelike wings whirring, tiny needle-sharp teeth bared, its fairylike body covered with thick black hair and its four tiny fists clenched with fury. Harry caught it full in the face with a blast of Doxycide; it froze in midair and fell, with a surprisingly loud *thunk*, onto the worn carpet below. Harry picked it up and threw it in the bucket.

“Fred, what are you doing?” said Mrs. Weasley sharply. “Spray that at once and throw it away!”

Harry looked around. Fred was holding a struggling doxy between his forefinger and thumb.

“Right-o,” Fred said brightly, spraying the doxy quickly in the face so that it fainted, but the moment Mrs. Weasley’s back was turned he pocketed it with a wink.

“We want to experiment with doxy venom for our Skiving Snackboxes,” George told Harry under his breath.

Defly spraying two doxies at once as they soared straight for his nose, Harry moved closer to George and muttered out of the corner of

his mouth, “What are Skiving Snackboxes?”

“Range of sweets to make you ill,” George whispered, keeping a wary eye on Mrs. Weasley’s back. “Not seriously ill, mind, just ill enough to get you out of a class when you feel like it. Fred and I have been developing them this summer. They’re double-ended, color-coded chews. If you eat the orange half of the Puking Pastilles, you throw up. Moment you’ve been rushed out of the lesson for the hospital wing, you swallow the purple half —”

“— which restores you to full fitness, enabling you to pursue the leisure activity of your own choice during an hour that would otherwise have been devoted to unprofitable boredom.” That’s what we’re putting in the adverts, anyway,” whispered Fred, who had edged over out of Mrs. Weasley’s line of vision and was now sweeping a few stray doxies from the floor and adding them to his pocket. “But they still need a bit of work. At the moment our testers are having a bit of trouble stopping puking long enough to swallow the purple end.”

“Testers?”

“Us,” said Fred. “We take it in turns. George did the Fainting Fancies — we both tried the Nosebleed Nougat —”

“Mum thought we’d been dueling,” said George.

“Joke shop still on, then?” Harry muttered, pretending to be adjusting the nozzle on his spray.

“Well, we haven’t had a chance to get premises yet,” said Fred, dropping his voice even lower as Mrs. Weasley mopped her brow with her scarf before returning to the attack, “so we’re running it as a mail-order service at the moment. We put advertisements in the *Daily*

Prophet last week.”

“All thanks to you, mate,” said George. “But don’t worry . . . Mum hasn’t got a clue. She won’t read the *Daily Prophet* anymore, ’cause of it telling lies about you and Dumbledore.”

Harry grinned. He had forced the Weasley twins to take the thousand-Galleon prize money he had won in the Triwizard Tournament to help them realize their ambition to open a joke shop, but he was still glad to know that his part in furthering their plans was unknown to Mrs. Weasley, who did not think that running a joke shop was a suitable career for two of her sons.

The de-doxying of the curtains took most of the morning. It was past midday when Mrs. Weasley finally removed her protective scarf, sank into a sagging armchair, and sprang up again with a cry of disgust, having sat on the bag of dead rats. The curtains were no longer buzzing; they hung limp and damp from the intensive spraying; unconscious doxies lay crammed in the bucket at the foot of them beside a bowl of their black eggs, at which Crookshanks was now sniffing and Fred and George were shooting covetous looks.

“I think we’ll tackle *those* after lunch.”

Mrs. Weasley pointed at the dusty glass-fronted cabinets standing on either side of the mantelpiece. They were crammed with an odd assortment of objects: a selection of rusty daggers, claws, a coiled snakeskin, a number of tarnished silver boxes inscribed with languages Harry could not understand and, least pleasant of all, an ornate crystal bottle with a large opal set into the stopper, full of what Harry was quite sure was blood.

The clanging doorbell rang again. Everyone looked at Mrs.

Weasley.

“Stay here,” she said firmly, snatching up the bag of rats as Mrs. Black’s screeches started up again from down below. “I’ll bring up some sandwiches.”

She left the room, closing the door carefully behind her. At once, everyone dashed over to the window to look down onto the doorstep. They could see the top of an unkempt gingery head and a stack of precariously balanced cauldrons.

“Mundungus!” said Hermione. “What’s he brought all those cauldrons for?”

“Probably looking for a safe place to keep them,” said Harry. “Isn’t that what he was doing the night he was supposed to be tailing me? Picking up dodgy cauldrons?”

“Yeah, you’re right!” said Fred, as the front door opened; Mundungus heaved his cauldrons through it and disappeared from view. “Blimey, Mum won’t like that . . .”

He and George crossed to the door and stood beside it, listening intently. Mrs. Black’s screaming had stopped again.

“Mundungus is talking to Sirius and Kingsley,” Fred muttered, frowning with concentration. “Can’t hear properly . . . d’you reckon we can risk the Extendable Ears?”

“Might be worth it,” said George. “I could sneak upstairs and get a pair —”

But at that precise moment there was an explosion of sound from downstairs that rendered Extendable Ears quite unnecessary. All of them could hear exactly what Mrs. Weasley was shouting at the top of her voice.

“WE ARE NOT RUNNING A HIDEOUT FOR STOLEN GOODS!”

“I love hearing Mum shouting at someone else,” said Fred, with a satisfied smile on his face as he opened the door an inch or so to allow Mrs. Weasley’s voice to permeate the room better. “It makes such a nice change.”

“— COMPLETELY IRRESPONSIBLE, AS IF WE HAVEN’T GOT ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT WITHOUT YOU DRAGGING STOLEN CAULDRONS INTO THE HOUSE —”

“The idiots are letting her get into her stride,” said George, shaking his head. “You’ve got to head her off early, otherwise she builds up a head of steam and goes on for hours. And she’s been dying to have a go at Mundungus ever since he sneaked off when he was supposed to be following you, Harry — and there goes Sirius’s mum again —”

Mrs. Weasley’s voice was lost amid fresh shrieks and screams from the portraits in the hall. George made to shut the door to drown the noise, but before he could do so, a house-elf edged into the room.

Except for the filthy rag tied like a loincloth around its middle, it was completely naked. It looked very old. Its skin seemed to be several times too big for it and though it was bald like all house-elves, there was a quantity of white hair growing out of its large, batlike ears. Its eyes were a bloodshot and watery gray, and its fleshy nose was large and rather snoutlike.

The elf took absolutely no notice of Harry and the rest. Acting as though it could not see them, it shuffled hunchbacked, slowly and doggedly, toward the far end of the room, muttering under its breath

all the while in a hoarse, deep voice like a bullfrog's, “. . . Smells like a drain and a criminal to boot, but she's no better, nasty old blood traitor with her brats messing up my Mistress's house, oh my poor Mistress, if she knew, if she knew the scum they've let in her house, what would she say to old Kreacher, oh the shame of it, Mudbloods and werewolves and traitors and thieves, poor old Kreacher, what can he do . . .”

“Hello, Kreacher,” said Fred very loudly, closing the door with a snap.

The house-elf froze in his tracks, stopped muttering, and then gave a very pronounced and very unconvincing start of surprise.

“Kreacher did not see Young Master,” he said, turning around and bowing to Fred. Still facing the carpet, he added, perfectly audibly, “Nasty little brat of a blood traitor it is.”

“Sorry?” said George. “Didn't catch that last bit.”

“Kreacher said nothing,” said the elf, with a second bow to George, adding in a clear undertone, “and there's its twin, unnatural little beasts they are.”

Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not. The elf straightened up, eyeing them all very malevolently, and apparently convinced that they could not hear him as he continued to mutter.

“. . . and there's the Mudblood, standing there bold as brass, oh if my Mistress knew, oh how she'd cry, and there's a new boy, Kreacher doesn't know his name, what is he doing here, Kreacher doesn't know . . .”

“This is Harry, Kreacher,” said Hermione tentatively. “Harry Potter.”

Kreacher's pale eyes widened and he muttered faster and more furiously than ever.

"The Mudblood is talking to Kreacher as though she is my friend, if Kreacher's Mistress saw him in such company, oh what would she say —"

"Don't call her a Mudblood!" said Ron and Ginny together, very angrily.

"It doesn't matter," Hermione whispered, "he's not in his right mind, he doesn't know what he's —"

"Don't kid yourself, Hermione, he knows *exactly* what he's saying," said Fred, eyeing Kreacher with great dislike.

Kreacher was still muttering, his eyes on Harry.

"Is it true? Is it Harry Potter? Kreacher can see the scar, it must be true, that's that boy who stopped the Dark Lord, Kreacher wonders how he did it —"

"Don't we all, Kreacher?" said Fred.

"What do you want anyway?" George asked.

Kreacher's huge eyes darted onto George.

"Kreacher is cleaning," he said evasively.

"A likely story," said a voice behind Harry.

Sirius had come back; he was glowering at the elf from the doorway. The noise in the hall had abated; perhaps Mrs. Weasley and Mundungus had moved their argument down into the kitchen. At the sight of Sirius, Kreacher flung himself into a ridiculously low bow that flattened his snoutlike nose on the floor.

"Stand up straight," said Sirius impatiently. "Now, what are you up to?"

“Kreacher is cleaning,” the elf repeated. “Kreacher lives to serve the noble house of Black —”

“— and it’s getting blacker every day, it’s filthy,” said Sirius.

“Master always liked his little joke,” said Kreacher, bowing again, and continuing in an undertone, “Master was a nasty ungrateful swine who broke his mother’s heart —”

“My mother didn’t have a heart, Kreacher,” Sirius snapped. “She kept herself alive out of pure spite.”

Kreacher bowed again and said, “Whatever Master says,” then muttered furiously, “Master is not fit to wipe slime from his mother’s boots, oh my poor Mistress, what would she say if she saw Kreacher serving him, how she hated him, what a disappointment he was —”

“I asked you what you were up to,” said Sirius coldly. “Every time you show up pretending to be cleaning, you sneak something off to your room so we can’t throw it out.”

“Kreacher would never move anything from its proper place in Master’s house,” said the elf, then muttered very fast, “Mistress would never forgive Kreacher if the tapestry was thrown out, seven centuries it’s been in the family, Kreacher must save it, Kreacher will not let Master and the blood traitors and the brats destroy it —”

“I thought it might be that,” said Sirius, casting a disdainful look at the opposite wall. “She’ll have put another Permanent Sticking Charm on the back of it, I don’t doubt, but if I can get rid of it I certainly will. Now go away, Kreacher.”

It seemed that Kreacher did not dare disobey a direct order; nevertheless, the look he gave Sirius as he shuffled out past him was redolent of deepest loathing and he muttered all the way out of the

room.

“— comes back from Azkaban ordering Kreacher around, oh my poor Mistress, what would she say if she saw the house now, scum living in it, her treasures thrown out, she swore he was no son of hers and he’s back, they say he’s a murderer too —”

“Keep muttering and I will be a murderer!” said Sirius irritably, and he slammed the door shut on the elf.

“Sirius, he’s not right in the head,” said Hermione pleadingly, “I don’t think he realizes we can hear him.”

“He’s been alone too long,” said Sirius, “taking mad orders from my mother’s portrait and talking to himself, but he was always a foul little —”

“If you just set him free,” said Hermione hopefully, “maybe —”

“We can’t set him free, he knows too much about the Order,” said Sirius curtly. “And anyway, the shock would kill him. You suggest to him that he leaves this house, see how he takes it.”

Sirius walked across the room, where the tapestry Kreacher had been trying to protect hung the length of the wall. Harry and the others followed.

The tapestry looked immensely old; it was faded and looked as though doxies had gnawed it in places; nevertheless, the golden thread with which it was embroidered still glinted brightly enough to show them a sprawling family tree dating back (as far as Harry could tell) to the Middle Ages. Large words at the very top of the tapestry read:

THE NOBLE AND MOST ANCIENT HOUSE OF BLACK

“TOUJOURS PUR”

“You’re not on here!” said Harry, after scanning the bottom of the tree.

“I used to be there,” said Sirius, pointing at a small, round, charred hole in the tapestry, rather like a cigarette burn. “My sweet old mother blasted me off after I ran away from home — Kreacher’s quite fond of muttering the story under his breath.”

“You ran away from home?”

“When I was about sixteen,” said Sirius. “I’d had enough.”

“Where did you go?” asked Harry, staring at him.

“Your dad’s place,” said Sirius. “Your grandparents were really good about it; they sort of adopted me as a second son. Yeah, I camped out at your dad’s during the school holidays, and then when I was seventeen I got a place of my own, my Uncle Alphard had left me a decent bit of gold — he’s been wiped off here too, that’s probably why — anyway, after that I looked after myself. I was always welcome at Mr. and Mrs. Potter’s for Sunday lunch, though.”

“But . . . why did you . . . ?”

“Leave?” Sirius smiled bitterly and ran a hand through his long, unkempt hair. “Because I hated the whole lot of them: my parents, with their pure-blood mania, convinced that to be a Black made you practically royal . . . my idiot brother, soft enough to believe them . . . that’s him.”

Sirius jabbed a finger at the very bottom of the tree, at the name REGULUS BLACK. A date of death (some fifteen years previously) followed the date of birth.

“He was younger than me,” said Sirius, “and a much better son, as I was constantly reminded.”

“But he died,” said Harry.

“Yeah,” said Sirius. “Stupid idiot . . . he joined the Death Eaters.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Come on, Harry, haven’t you seen enough of this house to tell what kind of wizards my family were?” said Sirius testily.

“Were — were your parents Death Eaters as well?”

“No, no, but believe me, they thought Voldemort had the right idea, they were all for the purification of the Wizarding race, getting rid of Muggle-borns and having purebloods in charge. They weren’t alone either, there were quite a few people, before Voldemort showed his true colors, who thought he had the right idea about things. . . . They got cold feet when they saw what he was prepared to do to get power, though. But I bet my parents thought Regulus was a right little hero for joining up at first.”

“Was he killed by an Auror?” Harry asked tentatively.

“Oh no,” said Sirius. “No, he was murdered by Voldemort. Or on Voldemort’s orders, more likely, I doubt Regulus was ever important enough to be killed by Voldemort in person. From what I found out after he died, he got in so far, then panicked about what he was being asked to do and tried to back out. Well, you don’t just hand in your resignation to Voldemort. It’s a lifetime of service or death.”

“Lunch,” said Mrs. Weasley’s voice.

She was holding her wand high in front of her, balancing a huge tray loaded with sandwiches and cake on its tip. She was very red in the face and still looked angry. The others moved over to her, eager

for some food, but Harry remained with Sirius, who had bent closer to the tapestry.

“I haven’t looked at this for years. There’s Phineas Nigellus . . . my great-great-grandfather, see? Least popular headmaster Hogwarts ever had . . . and Araminta Melflua . . . cousin of my mother’s . . . tried to force through a Ministry Bill to make Muggle-hunting legal . . . and dear Aunt Elladora . . . she started the family tradition of beheading house-elves when they got too old to carry tea trays . . . of course, anytime the family produced someone halfway decent they were disowned! I see Tonks isn’t on here. Maybe that’s why Kreacher won’t take orders from her — he’s supposed to do whatever anyone in the family asks him . . .”

“You and Tonks are related?” Harry asked, surprised.

“Oh yeah, her mother, Andromeda, was my favorite cousin,” said Sirius, examining the tapestry carefully. “No, Andromeda’s not on here either, look —”

He pointed to another small round burn mark between two names, Bellatrix and Narcissa.

“Andromeda’s sisters are still here because they made lovely, respectable pure-blood marriages, but Andromeda married a Muggle-born, Ted Tonks, so —”

Sirius mimed blasting the tapestry with a wand and laughed sourly. Harry, however, did not laugh; he was too busy staring at the names to the right of Andromeda’s burn mark. A double line of gold embroidery linked Narcissa Black with Lucius Malfoy, and a single vertical gold line from their names led to the name Draco.

“You’re related to the Malfoys!”

"The pure-blood families are all interrelated," said Sirius. "If you're only going to let your sons and daughters marry purebloods your choice is very limited, there are hardly any of us left. Molly and I are cousins by marriage and Arthur's something like my second cousin once removed. But there's no point looking for them on here — if ever a family was a bunch of blood traitors it's the Weasleys."

But Harry was now looking at the name to the left of Andromeda's burn: Bellatrix Black, which was connected by a double line to Rodolphus Lestrangle.

"Lestrangle . . ." Harry said aloud. The name had stirred something in his memory; he knew it from somewhere, but for a moment he couldn't think where, though it gave him an odd, creeping sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"They're in Azkaban," said Sirius shortly.

Harry looked at him curiously.

"Bellatrix and her husband Rodolphus came in with Barty Crouch, Junior," said Sirius in the same brusque voice. "Rodolphus's brother, Rabastan, was with them too."

And Harry remembered: He had seen Bellatrix Lestrangle inside Dumbledore's Pensieve, the strange device in which thoughts and memories could be stored: a tall dark woman with heavy-lidded eyes, who had stood at her trial and proclaimed her continuing allegiance to Lord Voldemort, her pride that she had tried to find him after his downfall and her conviction that she would one day be rewarded for her loyalty.

"You never said she was your —"

"Does it matter if she's my cousin?" snapped Sirius. "As far as I'm

concerned, they're not my family. *She's* certainly not my family. I haven't seen her since I was your age, unless you count a glimpse of her coming in to Azkaban. D'you think I'm proud of having relatives like her?"

"Sorry," said Harry quickly, "I didn't mean — I was just surprised, that's all —"

"It doesn't matter, don't apologize," Sirius mumbled at once. He turned away from the tapestry, his hands deep in his pockets. "I don't like being back here," he said, staring across the drawing room. "I never thought I'd be stuck in this house again."

Harry understood completely. He knew how he would feel if forced, when he was grown up and thought he was free of the place forever, to return and live at number four, Privet Drive.

"It's ideal for headquarters, of course," Sirius said. "My father put every security measure known to Wizard-kind on it when he lived here. It's Unplottable, so Muggles could never come and call — as if they'd have wanted to — and now Dumbledore's added his protection, you'd be hard put to find a safer house anywhere. Dumbledore's Secret-Keeper for the Order, you know — nobody can find headquarters unless he tells them personally where it is — that note Moody showed you last night, that was from Dumbledore . . ." Sirius gave a short, barklike laugh. "If my parents could see the use it was being put to now . . . well, my mother's portrait should give you some idea . . ."

He scowled for a moment, then sighed.

"I wouldn't mind if I could just get out occasionally and do something useful. I've asked Dumbledore whether I can escort you to

your hearing — as Snuffles, obviously — so I can give you a bit of moral support, what d'you think?"

Harry felt as though his stomach had sunk through the dusty carpet. He had not thought about the hearing once since dinner the previous evening; in the excitement of being back with the people he liked best, of hearing everything that was going on, it had completely flown his mind. At Sirius's words, however, the crushing sense of dread returned to him. He stared at Hermione and the Weasleys, all tucking into their sandwiches, and thought how he would feel if they went back to Hogwarts without him.

"Don't worry," Sirius said. Harry looked up and realized that Sirius had been watching him. "I'm sure they're going to clear you, there's definitely something in the International Statute of Secrecy about being allowed to use magic to save your own life."

"But if they do expel me," said Harry, quietly, "can I come back here and live with you?"

Sirius smiled sadly.

"We'll see."

"I'd feel a lot better about the hearing if I knew I didn't have to go back to the Dursleys," Harry pressed him.

"They must be bad if you prefer this place," said Sirius gloomily.

"Hurry up, you two, or there won't be any food left," Mrs. Weasley called.

Sirius heaved another great sigh, cast a dark look at the tapestry, and he and Harry went to join the others.

Harry tried his best not to think about the hearing while they emptied the glass cabinets that afternoon. Fortunately for him, it was

a job that required a lot of concentration, as many of the objects in there seemed very reluctant to leave their dusty shelves. Sirius sustained a bad bite from a silver snuffbox; within seconds, his bitten hand had developed an unpleasant crusty covering like a tough brown glove.

“It’s okay,” he said, examining the hand with interest before tapping it lightly with his wand and restoring its skin to normal, “must be Wartcap powder in there.”

He threw the box aside into the sack where they were depositing the debris from the cabinets; Harry saw George wrap his own hand carefully in a cloth moments later and sneak the box into his already doxy-filled pocket.

They found an unpleasant-looking silver instrument, something like a many-legged pair of tweezers, which scuttled up Harry’s arm like a spider when he picked it up, and attempted to puncture his skin; Sirius seized it and smashed it with a heavy book entitled *Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*. There was a musical box that emitted a faintly sinister, tinkling tune when wound, and they all found themselves becoming curiously weak and sleepy until Ginny had the sense to slam the lid shut; also a heavy locket that none of them could open, a number of ancient seals and, in a dusty box, an Order of Merlin, First Class, that had been awarded to Sirius’s grandfather for “Services to the Ministry.”

“It means he gave them a load of gold,” said Sirius contemptuously, throwing the medal into the rubbish sack.

Several times, Kreacher sidled into the room and attempted to smuggle things away under his loincloth, muttering horrible curses

every time they caught him at it. When Sirius wrested a large golden ring bearing the Black crest from his grip Kreacher actually burst into furious tears and left the room sobbing under his breath and calling Sirius names Harry had never heard before.

“It was my father’s,” said Sirius, throwing the ring into the sack. “Kreacher wasn’t *quite* as devoted to him as to my mother, but I still caught him snogging a pair of my father’s old trousers last week.”

Mrs. Weasley kept them all working very hard over the next few days. The drawing room took three days to decontaminate; finally the only undesirable things left in it were the tapestry of the Black family tree, which resisted all their attempts to remove it from the wall, and the rattling writing desk; Moody had not dropped by headquarters yet, so they could not be sure what was inside it.

They moved from the drawing room to a dining room on the ground floor where they found spiders large as saucers lurking in the dresser (Ron left the room hurriedly to make a cup of tea and did not return for an hour and a half). The china, which bore the Black crest and motto, was all thrown unceremoniously into a sack by Sirius, and the same fate met a set of old photographs in tarnished silver frames, all of whose occupants squealed shrilly as the glass covering them smashed.

Snape might refer to their work as “cleaning,” but in Harry’s opinion they were really waging war on the house, which was putting up a very good fight, aided and abetted by Kreacher. The house-elf kept appearing wherever they were congregated, his muttering becoming more and more offensive as he attempted to remove anything he could from the rubbish sacks. Sirius went as far as to

threaten him with clothes, but Kreacher fixed him with a watery stare and said, "Master must do as Master wishes," before turning away and muttering very loudly, "but Master will not turn Kreacher away, no, because Kreacher knows what they are up to, oh yes, he is plotting against the Dark Lord, yes, with these Mudbloods and traitors and scum . . ."

At which Sirius, ignoring Hermione's protests, seized Kreacher by the back of his loincloth and threw him bodily from the room.

The doorbell rang several times a day, which was the cue for Sirius's mother to start shrieking again, and for Harry and the others to attempt to eavesdrop on the visitor, though they gleaned very little from the brief glimpses and snatches of conversation they were able to sneak before Mrs. Weasley recalled them to their tasks. Snape flitted in and out of the house several times more, though to Harry's relief they never came face-to-face; he also caught sight of his Transfiguration teacher, Professor McGonagall, looking very odd in a Muggle dress and coat, though she also seemed too busy to linger.

Sometimes, however, the visitors stayed to help; Tonks joined them for a memorable afternoon in which they found a murderous old ghoul lurking in an upstairs toilet, and Lupin, who was staying in the house with Sirius but who left it for long periods to do mysterious work for the Order, helped them repair a grandfather clock that had developed the unpleasant habit of shooting heavy bolts at passersby. Mundungus redeemed himself slightly in Mrs. Weasley's eyes by rescuing Ron from an ancient set of purple robes that had tried to strangle him when he removed them from their wardrobe.

Despite the fact that he was still sleeping badly, still having

dreams about corridors and locked doors that made his scar prickle, Harry was managing to have fun for the first time all summer. As long as he was busy he was happy; when the action abated, however, whenever he dropped his guard, or lay exhausted in bed watching blurred shadows move across the ceiling, the thought of the looming Ministry hearing returned to him. Fear jabbed at his insides like needles as he wondered what was going to happen to him if he was expelled. The idea was so terrible that he did not dare voice it aloud, not even to Ron and Hermione, who, though he often saw them whispering together and casting anxious looks in his direction, followed his lead in not mentioning it. Sometimes he could not prevent his imagination showing him a faceless Ministry official who was snapping his wand in two and ordering him back to the Dursleys' . . . but he would not go. He was determined on that. He would come back here to Grimmauld Place and live with Sirius.

He felt as though a brick had dropped into his stomach when Mrs. Weasley turned to him during dinner on Wednesday evening and said quietly, "I've ironed your best clothes for tomorrow morning, Harry, and I want you to wash your hair tonight too. A good first impression can work wonders."

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Ginny all stopped talking and looked over at him. Harry nodded and tried to keep eating his chops, but his mouth had become so dry he could not chew.

"How am I getting there?" he asked Mrs. Weasley, trying to sound unconcerned.

"Arthur's taking you to work with him," said Mrs. Weasley gently. Mr. Weasley smiled encouragingly at Harry across the table.

“You can wait in my office until it’s time for the hearing,” he said.

Harry looked over at Sirius, but before he could ask the question, Mrs. Weasley had answered it.

“Professor Dumbledore doesn’t think it’s a good idea for Sirius to go with you, and I must say I —”

“— think he’s *quite right*,” said Sirius through clenched teeth.

Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips.

“When did Dumbledore tell you that?” Harry said, staring at Sirius.

“He came last night, when you were in bed,” said Mr. Weasley.

Sirius stabbed moodily at a potato with his fork. Harry dropped his own eyes to his plate. The thought that Dumbledore had been in the house on the eve of his hearing and not asked to see him made him feel, if that were possible, even worse.

Die adellike en antieke Huis van Swardt

Mev. Weasley volg hulle boontoe met 'n iesegrimmige uitdrukking.

“Ek verwag dat julle reguit bed toe gaan, geen geselsery nie,” sê sy toe hulle by die eerste trapportaal kom. “Ons gaan môre 'n besige dag hê. Ginny slaap seker al,” sê sy vir Hermien, “probeer tog om haar nie wakker te raas nie.”

“Slaap, ja, reg,” sê Fred onderlangs nadat Hermien vir hulle nag gesê het en hulle na die volgende verdieping klim. “As Ginny nie lê en wag vir Hermien om vir haar alles te vertel wat hulle daar onder gesê het nie, is ek 'n Flobberwurm . . .”

“Goed, Ron, Harry,” sê mevrou Weasley by die tweede trapportaal. Sy wys na hul kamer. “Bed toe, julle twee.”

“Nag,” sê Harry en Ron vir die tweeling.

“Lekker slaap,” sê Fred en knipoog.

Mevrou Weasley trek die deur met 'n besliste klik agter Harry toe. Die slaapkamer lyk, indien moontlik, selfs klammer en triestiger as met sy aankoms. Die lêe portret teen die muur haal nou stadig en diep asem asof sy onsigbare bewoner slaap. Harry trek sy pajamas aan, haal sy bril af en klim in sy koue bed terwyl Ron uilsnoepies op die kas gooi om Hedwig en Pigwidgeon te kalmeer, wat rondtrappel en hul vlerke rusteloos fladder.

“Ons kan hulle nie elke nag laat uitgaan om te jag nie,” verduidelik Ron terwyl hy sy bruinrooi pajamas aantrek. “Dompeldorius wil nie hê so baie uile moet in die plein rondvlieg nie. Hy dink die mense sal agterdogtig raak. O ja . . . ek het vergeet . . .”

Hy stap na die deur en sluit dit.

“Hoekom doen jy dit?”

“Skepsel,” sê Ron toe hy die lig afskakel. “Die eerste nag het hy drie-uur in die oggend hier ingekom. Glo my, jy wil nie wakker word met hom in jou kamer nie. In elk geval . . .” hy klim in die bed, kruip onder die beddegoed in en draai in die donker na Harry, wat sy buitelyn in die maanlig wat deur die vuil venster filter, kan sien, “wat dink jy?”

Harry hoef nie te vra wat Ron bedoel nie.

"Wel, hulle't nie eintlik iets vir ons gesê wat ons nie kon raai nie, of hoe?" sê hy terwyl hy aan alles probeer dink wat onder gesê is. "Ek bedoel, al wat hulle regtig gesê het, is dat die Orde mense probeer keer om by Wol –"

Ron trek sy asem skerp in.

"– demort," voltooi Harry. "Wanneer gaan jy begin om sy naam te gebruik? Sirius en Lupin doen dit."

Ron ignoreer die laaste aanmerking.

"Ja, jy's reg," sê hy, "ons weet omtrent alles wat hulle vir ons gesê het – danksy die Verlengbare Ore. Die enigste nuwe sukkie was –"

Klap.

"EINA!"

"Hou jou mond, Ron, of Ma kom boontoe."

"Julle twee het op my knieë geappareer!"

"Ja, wel, dis moeiliker in die donker."

Harry sien dofweg Fred en George se buitelyne soos hulle van Ron se bed afspring. Die bedvere kraak en Harry se matras sak 'n cent toe George naby sy voete gaan sit.

"So, is julle al daar?" vra George gretig.

"By die wapen wat Sirius genoem het?" sê Harry.

"Laat glip het, is meer korrek," sê Fred, wat langs Ron sit, met smaak. "Ons het niks *daaroor* met ons Oortjies gehoornie, het ons?"

"Wat dink julle is dit?" vra Harry.

"Kan enigiets wees," sê Fred.

"Maar daar kan tog niks ergers as die Avada Kedava-vloek wees nie?" sê Ron. "Wat is erger as die dood?"

"Dalk is dit iets wat 'n klomp mense gelyk doodmaal," stel George voor.

"Dalk is dit 'n vreeslik pynlike manier om mense dood te maak," sê Ron benoud.

"Hy't klaar die Cruciatus-vloek vir pyn," sê Harry, "hy't nie iets beters nodig nie."

Daar is 'n stilte en Harry weet dat die Weasleys net soos hy wonder tot watter gruwele hierdie wapen in staat kan wees.

"So, wie dink julle het dit nou?" vra George.

"Ek hoop dis ons kant," sê Ron en hy klink gespanne.

"Indien wel, hou Dompeldorius dit seker iewers," sê Fred.

"Waar?" sê Ron vinnig. "By Hogwarts?"

"Waarskynlik, ja!" sê George. "Dis waar hy die Towenaar se Steen weggesteek het."

"'n Wapen gaan tog baie groter as die Steen wees!" sê Ron.

"Nie noodwendig nie," sê Fred.

"Ja, grootte beteken nie noodwendig krag nie," sê George. "Kyk vir Ginny."

"Wat bedoel jy?" sê Harry.

"Dan het jy nog nie een van haar Vlermuiverskrikker-vloeke beleef nie?"

"Sjij!" sê Fred en sit effens regopper op die bed. "Luister!" Hulle bly stil. Voetstappe kom met die trappe op.

"Ma," sê George en oombliklik is daar 'n harde klapgeluid en Harry voel hoe die gewig aan die voetenent van sy bed verdwyn. 'n Paar sekondes later hoor hulle hoe die vloerplank voor hulle deur kraak. Dis duidelik dat mevrou Weasley voor die deur staan en luister of hulle praat.

Hedwig en Pigwidgeon hoe-hoe droewig. Die vloerplank kraak weer en hulle hoor hoe sy boontoe gaan om te luister wat Fred en George doen.

"Sy vertrou ons glad nie, weet jy," sê Ron vol spyt.

Harry is seker hy sal nie aan die slaap kan raak nie. Die aand het soveel dinge opgelewer om oor te dink en hy verwag hy sal ure lank daaroor lê en tob. Hy wil graag nog met Ron gesels, maar mevrou Weasley is kraak-kraak op pad' ondertoe en toe sy weg is, hoor hy duidelik hoe die res boontoe kom. gediertes met baie bene skarrel ritselend op en af voor die kamerdeur en Hagrid, die onderwyser vir die Versorging van Magiese Kreature sê: "*Hulle is pragtig, nè, Harry? Ons gaan hierdie kwartaal wapens bestudeer.*" en Harry sien dat die gediertes kanonne vir koppe het en na hom toe omswaai. hy koes.

Toe hy hom weer kom kry, lê hy in 'n warm bal opgekrul onder sy beddegoed en George se harde stem daver deur die kamer.

"Ma sê julle moet opstaan, julle ontbyt is in die kombuis en syt julle daarna in die sitkamer nodig. Daar's baie meer Doxies as wat sy gedink het, en syt 'n nes vol dooie Pofstringe onder die bank gekry."

'n Halfuur later gaan Harry en Ron, ná hulle vinnig aangetrek en ontbyt geëet het, sitkamer toe. Dis 'n lang vertrek op die eerste verdieping met 'n hoë plafon en olyfgroen mure behang met vuil tapisserieë. Stofwolkies slaan uit die mat op elke keer dat iemand daarop trap en die lang mosgroen fluweelgordyne gons asof hulle vol onsigbare bye is. Dis waar mevrou Weasley, Hermien, Ginny, Fred en George saamgedrom staan. Hulle lyk almal 'n bietjie eienaardig, want hulle het doeke om hul monde en neuse gebind. Elkeen hou 'n groot spuitbottel vol swart vloeistof vas.

"Maak jul gesigte toe en neem 'n spuitkan," sê mevrou Weasley vir Harry en Ron die oomblik toe sy hulle sien. Sy wys na nog twee bottels swart vloeistof wat op 'n speekbeentafeltjie staan. "Dis Doxie-sied. Ek het nog nooit so 'n kwaai besmetting gesien nie – wat dandie huiself die laaste tien jaar gedoen het . . ."

Hermien se gesig is halfbedek met 'n teedoek, maar Harry sien duidelik hoe sy verwykend na mevrou Weasley kyk.

"Skepsel is baie oud, hy kon seker nie –"

"Jy sal verbaas wees wat Skepsel kan doen as hy wil, Hermien," sê Sirius, wat die sitkamer pas binnegekom het met 'n bloedbevleete sak vol goed wat soos dooie rotte lyk. "Ek het nou net vir Bokbok kos gegee," verduidelik hy toe hy Harry se vraende blik sien. "Ek hou hom bo in my ma se slaapkamer. Nou ja, hierdie skryftafel . . ."

Hy laat val die sak rotte in 'n leunstoel en buk om die kas te bekijk, wat, soos Harry nou vir die eerste keer oplet, liggies skud.

"Wel, Molly, ek is taamlik seker dis 'n Boggart," sê Sirius terwyl hy deur die sleutelgat loer, "maar miskien moet Maloog eers 'n ogie hieroor gooi voor ons dit uitlaat. Soos ek my ma ken, kan dit iets baie ergers wees."

"Ek stem saam, Sirius," sê mevrou Weasley.

Hulle praat albei in ligte, versigtige, beleefde stemme, wat dit duidelik maak dat hulle hul onderonsie van die vorige aand nog nie vergeet het nie.

'n Harde, klaterende klok lui iewers onder, gevolg deur die kreet en geskree van die vorige aand toe Tonks die sambreelstaander omgestamp het.

"Ek sê gedurig vir hulle om nie die deurklokkie te lui nie!" sê Sirius ergerlik toe hy uit die vertrek storm. Hulle hoor hom dawerend met die trappe af hardloop terwyl mevrou Swardt se kras geskree weer eens deur die huis galm:

"Skandvlekke, vieslike halfbloede, bloedverraaiers, kinders van gemors . . ."

"Maak asseblief die deur toe, Harry," sê mevrou Weasley.

Harry neem so lank as wat hy kan om die sitkamerdeur toe te maak in die hoop dat hy iets wat daar onder aangaan, sal hoor. Sirius het dit skynbaar reggekry om die gordyne voor sy ma se portret toe te trek, want sy het ophou skree. Hy hoor hoe Sirius deur die voorportaal stap en die geklater van die ketting aan die voordeur. Toe volg 'n diep stem wat hy as Kingsley Shacklebolt s'n herken. "Hestia het my so pas afgelos, sy't nou Moodie se mantel. Gedink ek los 'n verslag vir Dompeldorus . . ."

Harry voel mevrou Weasley se oë in sy agterkop boor. Hy stoot

die sitkamerdeur spytig toe en sluit weer by die Doxie-vegters aan.

Mevrou Weasley leun vorentoe en kyk vlugtig na die bladsy oor Doxies in *Gilderoy Lockhart se Handleiding tot Huishoudelike Plae* wat oop op die bank lê.

“Goed, julle klomp, julle moet versigtig wees, want Doxies byt en hul tande is giftig. Ek het ’n bottel teenmiddel, maar ek sal verkies dat niemand dit nodig kry nie.”

Sy kom orent, neem voor die gordyne stelling in en wink hulle nader.

“As ek die woord sê, moet julle dadelik begin spuit. Ek skat hulle sal na ons toe vlieg, maar die boek sê een goeie spuit sal hulle verlam. Sodra hulle bedwelm is, kan julle hulle in hierdie emmer gooi.”

Sy maak seker dat sy nie onder skoot is nie en lig haar eie spuit-kan.

“Gereed – spuit!”

Harry spuit nog net vir ’n paar sekondes toe ’n uitgegroeide Doxie uit ’n vou in die materiaal vlieg. Sy blink keweragtige vlerke gons, sy naaldskerp tandjies is ontbloom, sy feeagtige lyfie is oortrek met digte swart hare en sy vier klein vuisies is gebal van woede. Harry tref hom vol in die gesig met ’n straal Doxiesied. Die Doxie vries in sy vlug en val met ’n verbasend harde plofgeluid op die verweerde mat. Harry tel hom op en gooi hom in die emmer.

“Fred, wat maak jy?” sê mevrou Weasley skerp. “Spuit daardie een onmiddellik en gooi hom weg!”

Harry kyk om. Fred hou ’n worstelende Doxie tussen sy voorvinger en duim vas.

“Oukei,” sê Fred vrolik en spuit die Doxie vinnig in die gesig sodat hy flou word, maar die oomblik toe mevrou Weasley wegkyk, knipoog hy vir Harry en steek die Doxie in sy sak.

“Ons wil met hulle gif eksperimenteer vir ons Stokkiesdraai-snoepies,” vertel George gedemp vir Harry.

Harry spuit twee Doxies wat op sy neus afpyl behendig met een skoot, beweeg nader aan George en prewel uit die hoek van sy mond: “Wat is Stokkiesdraai-snoepies?”

“Ons reeks lekkergoed wat jou siek maak,” fluister George, sy oë op mevrou Weasley se rug. “Nie ernstig siek nie, oukei, net siek genoeg om jou uit die klas te kry wanneer jy wil stokkies draai. Ek en Fred werk al die hele somer daaraan. Dis toffies wat uit twee dele en twee kleure bestaan. As jy die oranje deel van ’n Braakbom eet, gooi jy op. Die oomblik dat jy uit die klas na die siekeboek geneem word, sluk jy die pers deel –”

“wat jou onmiddellik ten volle herstel en in staat stel om enige skuld van jou keuse te beoefen tydens 'n uur wat jy andersins aan iets ondraaglik verveligs sou moes wy.” In elk geval, dis wat ons in die advertensie sê,” fluister Fred, wat uit mevrou Weasley se gesig veld geskuifel het en 'n paar Doxies wat eenkant op die vloer lê, opdraap en in sy sak stop. “Maar ons moet nog daaraan werk. Op die oomblik sukkel ons toetsers om lank genoeg op te hou kots sodat hulle die pers deel kan insluk.”

“Toetsers?”

“Ons,” sê Fred. “Ons maak beurte. George het die Flouvrate getoets, ons het albei die Neusbloeinougat geëet –”

“Ma't gedink ons het 'n tweegeveg gehad,” sê George.

“Dan is die grapwinkel nog aan?” mompel Harry, wat maak of hy sy spuitkan se tuit verstel.

“Wel, ons het nog nie kans gehad om 'n perseel te soek nie,” sê Fred en sy stem sak toe mevrou Weasley haar voorkop met haar serp afvee voor sy weer tot die aanval oorgaan, “daarom bedryf ons dit op die oomblik as 'n posbesteldiens. Ons het verlede week advertensies in die *Daaglikse Profeet* geplaas.”

“Alles danksy jou, my ou,” sê George. “Maar moenie bekommerd wees nie, Ma weet niks. Sy lees nie meer die *Daaglikse Profeet* nie, oor al die leuens oor jou en Dompeldorius.”

Harry grinnik. Hy het die Weasley-tweeling gedwing om die prysgeld van 'n duisend Galjoene te aanvaar wat hy tydens die Drietowenaarstoernooi gewen het sodat hulle hul droom van 'n grapwinkel kan verwesenlik, maar hy is baie verlig om te hoor dat mevrou Weasley nie van sy aandeel weet nie. Sy dink nie 'n grapwinkel is 'n geskikte loopbaan vir twee van haar seuns nie.

Om die gordyne te ont-Doxie neem die grootste deel van die oggend in beslag. Dis reeds namiddag toe mevrou Weasley haar beskermende serp afhaal, in 'n ou gemakstoel neersak en onmiddellik met 'n kreet opvlieg omdat sy op die sak dooie rotte gaan sit het. Die gordyne gons nie meer nie, maar hang leweloos en klam van die intensiewe gespuut. Op die vloer staan 'n emmer vol bewustelose Doxies langs 'n bak met hul swart eiers, waaraan Kromskeen nou staan en ruik terwyl Fred en George met begerige oë daarna kyk.

“Ek stel voor ons takel *dit* ná middagete,” sê mevrou Weasley en wys na die stowwerige glasvertoonkaste aan weerskante van die kaggelrak. Hulle is stampvol gepak met 'n vreemde verskeidenheid voorwerpe: 'n versameling geroeste dolke, kloue, 'n opgekrulde slangvel, 'n aantal gevlekte silwer dosies gegraveer met tale wat Harry nie

ken nie en die aardigste van alles, 'n ryklik versierde kristalbottel met 'n prop gemaak van 'n groot opaal vol van iets wat Harry reken bloed is.

Die deurklokkie lui weer. Almal kyk na mevrou Weasley.

"Bly hier," sê sy ferm en raap die sak rotte op terwyl mevrou Swardt weer van onder af begin skree. "Ek bring vir julle toebroodjies."

Sy stap uit en maak die deur sorgvuldig agter haar toe. Almal storm dadelik na die venster en kyk af na die drumpel. Hulle sien 'n slordige bos rooierige hare en 'n wankelrige stapel hekseketels.

"Mundungus!" sê Hermien. "Hoekom bring hy al daardie hekseketels hierheen?"

"Soek seker 'n veilige bēreplek," sê Harry. "Dis mos waarmee hy besig was die nag toe hy veronderstel was om my te volg – gesteelde hekseketels."

"Ja, jy's reg!" sê Fred toe die voordeur oopgaan en Mundungus sy hekseketels oor die drumpel tel en uit hulle sig verdwyn. "Jislaaik, Ma gaan nie hiervan hou nie . . ."

Hy en George gaan staan teen die deur om te luister. Mevrou Swardt se krete word stil.

"Mundungus praat met Sirius en Kingsley," prewel Fred. Hy frons van konsentrasie. "Kan nie lekker hoor nie . . . dink julle ons kan dit waag met 'n paar Verlengbare Ore?"

"Kan dalk die moeite werd wees," sê George. "Ek kan gou boontoe glip en 'n paar –"

Maar op daardie presiese oomblik is daar 'n ontploffing van klank daar onder wat die Verlengbare Ore heeltemal oorbodig maak. Hulle almal kan duidelik hoor wat mevrou Weasley uit volle bors skreeu.

"DIS NIE 'N OPGAARPLEK VIR GESTEELDE GOEDERE NIE!"

"Ek is mal daaroor as Ma op iemand anders skree," sê Fred met 'n genoeglike glimlag op sy gesig. Hy stoot die deur op 'n skrefie oop sodat mevrou Weasley se stem die vertrek beter kan binne-dring. "Dis 'n baie lekker verandering."

"HEELTEMAL ONVERANTWOORDELIK! ASOF ONS NIE GENOEG HET OM ONS OOR TE BEKOMMER SONDER DAT JY GESTEELDE HEKSEKETELS IN DIE HUIS INDRA NIE –"

"Die sotte laat haar op dreef-kom," sê George en skud sy kop. "Jy moet haar vroeg afkeer, anders bou sy stoom op en hou ure lank aan. En sy kon nie wag om ou Mundungus by te kom nadat hy weggeglip het toe hy jou moes volg nie, Harry. Daar begin Sirius se ma ook weer."

Mevrou Weasley se stem raak weg onder die vars krete en geskree van die portrette in die voorportaal.

George wil die deur toemaak om die kabaal te demp, maar voor hy dit kan doen, glip 'n huiself binne.

Behalwe die vuil toinglap wat soos 'n lendekleed om sy middel gebind is, is hy heeltemal kaal. Hy lyk baie oud. Dit lyk of sy vel heeltemal te groot vir hom is en hoewel hy soos alle huiselwe bles is, groei daar yslike bosse wit hare uit sy groot vlermuissore. Sy grom is bloedbelope en waterig en sy groot, vlesige neus lyk effens soos 'n snoet.

Die elf steur hom glad nie aan Harry-hulle nie. Hy maak of hy hulle nie sien nie en skuifel krom-krom na die oorkant van die vertrek terwyl hy die hele tyd in 'n skor stem soos 'n brulpadda binnensmonds brom.

"...ruik soos 'n drein en boonop 'n misdadiger, maar sy's niks beter nie, nare ou bloedverraaiers en haar snotneuse wat my mevrou se huis bemors, o, my arme mevrou, as sy moet weet, as sy moet weet watter gemors hulle na haar huis bring, wat sal sy vir ou Skepsel sê, o, die skande, die skande, Modderbloeders en weerwolwe en verraaiers en diewe, arme ou Skepsel, wat kan hy doen."

"Hallo, Skepsel," sê Fred hard en klap die deur toe.

Die huiself gaan staan, hou op mompel en wip baie oordrewe en baie onoordeelkundig van die skrik.

"Skepsel het nie die jong meneer gesien nie," sê hy toe hy om-draai en vir Fred buig. Hy bly staan na die mat en voeg heeltemal hoorbaar by: "Gemene klein snotneus van 'n bloedverraaiers, dis wat."

"Ekskuus?" sê George. "Het die laaste stukkie nie mooi gehoor nie."

"Skepsel het niks gesê nie," sê die elf met 'n tweede buiging vir George voor hy in 'n gedempte dog helder stem byvoeg, "en daar's sy tweeling, onnatuurlike gedrogte."

Harry weet nie of hy moet lag of nie. Die elf kom orent, gluur boosaardig na hulle en mompel verder, oënskynlik seker dat hulle hom nie kan hoor nie.

"...en daar's die Modderbloed, ewe astrant, o, as my mevrou moet weet, o, hoe sal sy huil, en daar's die nuwe seun, Skepsel ken nie sy naam nie. Wat doen hy hier? Skepsel weet nie."

"Dis Harry, Skepsel," sê Hermien huiwerig. "Harry Potter."

Skepsel se bleek oë word groot en hy prewel vinniger en harder as tevore.

"Die Modderbloed praat met Skepsel asof sy sy vriend is, maar as Skepsel se mevrou hom in sulke geselskap moet sien, o, wat sal sy sê?"

"Jy noem haar nie weer 'n Modderbloed nie!" sê Ron en Ginny gelyk in kwaai stemme.

"Dit maak nie saak nie," fluister Hermien, "hy's nie reg in sy kop nie, hy weet nie wat hy –"

"Moet jou nie laat bluf nie, Hermien, hy weet presies wat hy sê," sê Fred en staar met groot weersin na Skepsel.

Skepsel mompel voort, sy oë op Harry

"Is dit waar? Is dit Harry Potter? Skepsel kan die litteken sien, dit moet waar wees, dis die seun wat die Donker Heer gekeer het, Skepsel wonder hoe hy dit gedoen het –"

"Ons wonder almal, Skepsel," sê Fred.

"Wat soek jy in elk geval hier?" vra George.

Skepsel se groot oë dartel na George.

"Skepsel maak skoon," sê hy ontwykend.

"Dis 'n mooi storie," sê 'n stem agter Harry.

Sirius het teruggekom. Hy staan in die deur en gluur na die elf. Die geraas in die voorportaal het afgeneem, waarskynlik omdat mevrou Weasley en Mundungus hul onderonsie onder in die kombuis voortsit. Toe Skepsel vir Sirius sien, gooi hy hom vooroor in 'n pot-sierlike buiging sodat hy sy snoetagtige neus teen die vloer vasdruk.

"Staan regop," sê Sirius ongeduldig. "Wat maak jy?"

"Skepsel maak skoon," herhaal die elf. "Skepsel bestaan net om die adellike Huis van Swardt te dien –"

"En dit word elke dag swarter," sê Sirius. "Dis vieslik."

"Meester hou van sy klein grappies," sê Skepsel. Hy buig weer en gaan gedemp voort: "Meester was 'n nare ondankbare vark wat sy moeder se hart gebreek het –"

"My ma het nie 'n hart gehad nie, Skepsel," snou Sirius. "Sy't uit pure moedswilligheid bly lewe."

Skepsel buig weer voor hy praat.

"Nes Meester daar sê," prewel hy vinnig. "Meester is nie geskik om die slym van sy moeder se stewels af te vee nie, o, my arme mevrou, wat sal sy sê as sy moet sien dat Skepsel hom bedien, hoe het sy hom nie gehaat nie, wat 'n teleurstelling was hy –"

"Ek het jou gevra wat jy doen," sê Sirius koud. "Jy daag elke keer iewers op, maak of jy skoonmaak en dra dan goed na jou kamer toe sodat ons dit nie kan weggooi nie."

"Skepsel sal nooit iets uit sy plek in Meester se huis verwyder nie," sê die elf en prewel dan weer baie vinnig. "Mevrou sal nooit vir Skepsel vergewe as hulle die tapisserie uitgooi nie, dis al vir sewe eeue in die familie, Skepsel moet dit red, Skepsel sal nie dat Meester en die bloedverraaiers en die snotneuse dit vernietig nie –"

"Ek het gedink dis dit," sê Sirius en kyk minagkend na die oorkantste muur. "Dit sal my nie verbaas as sy 'n Permanente Kleef-towerspreuk agterop gesit het nie, maar as ek daarvan ontslae kan raak, sal ek beslis. Gaan weg, Skepsel."

Dit lyk of Skepsel dit nie durf waag om 'n direkte bevel te verontsaam nie, maar die kyk wat hy nogtans vir Sirius gee toe hy verby hom skuifel, is vol van die diepste minagting en hy brom die hele tyd tot hy by die deur uit is.

"— kom terug van Azkaban en speel oor Skepsel baas, o, my arme mevrou, wat sal sy sê as sy die huis nou moet sien, gemors wat hier woon, haar skatte uitgegooi, sy't gesweer hy's nie haar seun nie en nou's hy terug, en boonop sê hulle hy's 'n moordenaar —"

"Hou aan brom en ek sal 'n moordenaar wees!" sê Sirius ergerlik en klap die deur agter die elf toe.

"Sirius, hy's nie lekker in sy kop nie," pleit Hermien. "Ek dink nie hy besef ons kan hom hoor nie."

"Hy was te lank alleen," sê Sirius. "Moes te veel gek opdragte van my ma se portret neem en met homself praat, maar hy was nog altyd 'n mislike klein —"

"As jy hom net sal vrylaat," sê Hermien hoopvol, "dalk —"

"Ons kan hom nie vrylaat nie, hy weet te veel van die Orde," sê Sirius kortaf. "En in elk geval, die skok sal hom doodmaak. Sê jy vir hom hy moet die huis verlaat en kyk hoe hy dit hanteer."

Sirius stap deur die vertrek na die tapisserie wat Skepsel probeer beskerm het en wat die hele muur bedek. Harry-hulle volg hom.

Die tapisserie is duidelik ontsettend oud. Dis verbleik en lyk asof Doxies op verskeie plekke daaraan geknaag het. Tog glinster die goue draad waarmee dit geborduur is nog so helder dat hulle die wydvertakte familiestamboom kan sien wat, soos dit vir Harry lyk, na die Middeleeue terugdateer. Aan die bokant van die tapisserie staan groot:

*Die adellike en antieke Huis van Swardt
"Toujours pur"*

"Jy's nie hierop nie!" sê Harry, wat begin het om die onderkant van die stamboom te bestudeer.

"Ek was eers," sê Sirius en wys na 'n klein ronde gaatjie in die tapisserie, baie soos 'n sigaretbrandmerk. "My dierbare moeder het my weggebrand toe ek van die huis af weggehoop het — Skepsel geniet dit verskriklik om oor daardie storie te loop en brom."

"Jy't van die huis af weggehoop?"

"Toe ek omtrent sestien was," sê Sirius. "Ek het genoeg gehad."

"Waarheen het jy gegaan?" vra Harry en staar na hom.

"Jou pa se huis," sê Sirius. "Jou oupa-hulle was baie goed vir my. Hulle't my soort van aangeneem as 'n tweede seun. Tydens die skoolvakansies het ek by jou pa-hulle gekuier en toe ek sewentien was, het ek my eie plek gekry. My oom Alphard het vir my 'n ordentlike klompie goud nagelaat – hy's ook hier uitgebrand, dis seker hoekom. In elk geval, daarna het ek vir myself gesorg. Ek was darem altyd welkom by meneer en mevrou Potter vir Sondagmiddagetes."

"Maar . . . hoekom het jy . . . ?"

"Weggeeloop?" Sirius glimlag bitter en trek sy vingers deur sy lang, onversorgde hare. "Omdat ek die hele gespuis gehaat het: my ouers met hul volbloedmanie, oortuig dat as jy 'n Swardt is, is jy adellik . . . my sotlike broer, sag genoeg om hulle te glo . . . dis hy."

Sirius druk 'n vinger op die naam "Regulus Swardt" heel onder op die stamboom. Die sterfdatum (ongeveer vyftien jaar gelede) volg op die geboortedatum.

"Hy was jonger as ek," sê Sirius, "en 'n baie beter seun – soos daar gedurig vir my gesê is."

"Maar hy's dood," sê Harry.

"Ja," sê Sirius. "Dom swaap . . . hy't by die Doodseters aangesluit."

"Jy speel!"

"Komaan, Harry, het jy nog nie genoeg van hierdie huis gesien om te weet watter soort towenaars my familie was nie?"

"Was – was jou ouers ook Doodseters?"

"Nee, nee, maar glo my, hulle't gedink Woldemort is op die regte spoor. Hulle was absoluut ten gunste van die suiwering van die towenaarsras, die verwydering van alle Moggelgeborenes en om volbloedtowenaars aan bewind te hê. Hulle was ook nie alleen nie. Voor Woldemort sy ware kleure gewys het, was daar heelwat mense wat gedink het hy het die regte idees oor dinge . . . Hoewel hulle koue voete gekry het toe hulle sien wat hy bereid is om te doen om die mag oor te neem. Maar ek wed my ouers het gedink Regulus is 'n ware klein held toe hy aangesluit het."

"Is hy deur 'n Auror doodgemaak?" vra Harry aarselend.

"O nee," sê Sirius. "Nee, hy's deur Woldemort vermoor. Of meer waarskynlik, op Woldemort se bevel. Ek twyfel of Regulus ooit belangrik genoeg vir Woldemort was om hom self te vermoor. Van wat ek ná sy dood kon uitvind, het Regulus goed gevorder in die beweging, maar toe't hy paniekerig geraak oor wat van hom verwag word en probeer uitkom. Wel, jy handig nie sommer net jou bedanking by Woldemort in nie. Dis lewenslange diens of die dood."

"Middagete," sê mevrou Weasley se stem.

Sy hou haar towerstaf hoog voor haar en balanseer 'n groot skinkbord opgestapel met toebroodjies en koekies op die punt. Haar gesig is baie rooi en sy lyk nog steeds kwaad. Die ander stap nader, gietig vir iets te ete, maar Harry bly staan by Sirius wat oor die tapisserie buig.

"Ek het jare laas hierna gekyk. Daar is Phineas Nigellus... my oorgrootoupa, sien?... die ongewildste skoolhoof wat Hogwarts nog ooit gehad het... en Araminta Meliflua... my ma se niggie... het probeer om 'n wetsontwerp deur die Ministerie te dwing wat die jag op Moggels wettig sou maak... en liewe tante Elladora... sy het die familietradisie begin om huiselwe te onthoof wanneer hulle te oud raak om skinkborde te dra... natuurlik, elke keer dat die familie iemand min of meer ordentlik geproduseer het, is hulle onterf. Ek sien Tonks is nie hier nie. Dis dalk hoekom Skepsel nie na haar bevele luister nie, hy's veronderstel om alles te doen wat enigeen in die familie hom vra -"

"Jy en Tonks is familie?" sê Harry verbaas.

"O ja, haar ma, Andromeda, was my gunstelingniggie," sê Sirius en bekyk die tapisserie van naderby. "Nee, Andromeda is ook nie hier nie, kyk -" Hy wys na nog 'n klein ronde brandmerk tussen twee name, Bellatrix en Narcissa.

"Andromeda se susters is al twee hier, omdat hulle pragtige, fatsoenlike volbloed huwelike gesluit het, maar Andromeda het met 'n Moggelgeborene getrou, Ted Tonks, dus -"

Sirius lag suur en maak of hy met sy towerstaf op die tapisserie losbrand.

Harry lag egter nie; hy is te besig om na die name regs van Andromeda se brandmerk te staar. 'n Dubbele lyn goue borduurdraad verbind Narcissa Swardt met Lucius Malfoy, en 'n enkele vertikale goue lyn loop van hul name na die naam Draco.

"Jy's familie van die Malfoys!"

"Die volbloed families is almal verwant aan mekaar," sê Sirius. "As jy jou seuns en dogters net toelaat om met volbloed towenaars te trou, is jou keuse baie beperk. Daar is feitlik niemand oor nie. Ek en Molly is aangetroude neef en niggie en Arthur is iets soos my agterkleinneef. Maar dit gaan nie help om hul name hier te probeer soek nie - as daar ooit 'n familie van ondertrouers en bloedverraaiers was, dan is dit die Weasleys." Maar Harry kyk reeds na die naam links van Andromeda se brandmerk: Bellatrix Swardt, wat met 'n dubbele lyn aan Rodolphus Lestranger verbind is.

"Lestranger..." sê Harry hardop. Die naam maak iets in sy geheue

wakker. Hy het dit al iewers gehoor, maar vir 'n oomblik kan hy nie dink waar nie, hoewel dit hom 'n vreemde, kriewelende sensasie op die krop van sy maag gee.

"Hulle is in Azkaban," sê Sirius kortaf.

Harry kyk nuuskierig na hom.

"Bellatrix en haar man Rodolphus het saam met Barty Crouch junior by Woldemort aangesluit," sê Sirius in dieselfde kortaf stem. "Rodolphus se broer Rabastan was ook saam met hulle."

Toe onthou Harry. Hy het vir Bellatrix Lestranger in Dompeldorius se Peinssif gesien, die vreemde toestel waarin gedagtes en herinnerings bewaar word. 'n Lang, donker vrou met swaar ooglede wat tydens haar verhoor voortdurende trou aan die heer Woldemort gesweer en haar trots verklaar het dat sy hom ná sy ondergang probeer vind het. Sy het ook haar oortuiging uitgespreek dat sy eendag vir haar loyaliteit beloon sal word.

"Jy't nooit gesê sy was jou –"

"Maak dit saak dat sy my niggie is?" snou Sirius. "Wat my betref, is hulle nie my familie nie. Sy is beslis nie familie nie. Ek het haar laas gesien toe ek so oud soos jy was, tensy jy die glimp van haar toe sy na Azkaban gekom het, tel. Dink jy ek is trots op so 'n familielid?"

"Jammer," sê Harry vinnig, "ek het nie bedoel nie – ek was net verbaas, dis al –"

"Dit maak nie saak nie, moenie verskoning vra nie," mompel Sirius. Hy draai weg van die tapisserie, sy hande diep in sy sakke. "Ek hou niks daarvan om terug te wees nie," sê hy en staar na die sitkamer. "Ek het nooit kon dink dat ek weer in hierdie huis sal sit nie."

Harry verstaan dit baie goed. Hy weet hoe hy sal voel as hy, wanneer hy groot is en dink hy is vir altyd van die plek ontslae, moet teruggaan na Ligusterlaan 4 en daar woon.

"Dis natuurlik ideaal as Hoofkwartier," sê Sirius. "My pa het elke denkbare veiligheidsmaatreël bekend aan towenaars aangebring toe hy hier gewoon het. Dis op geen kaart nie en geen Moggel sal ooit hier kom klop nie – asof hulle sou wou. En nou dat Dompeldorius sy beskerming bygevoeg het, kan jy nêrens 'n veiliger huis kry nie. Dompeldorius is die Orde se Geheimhouer, weet jy – niemand kan die Hoofkwartier kry tensy hy persoonlik vir hulle sê waar dit is nie. Daardie nota wat Moodie laas nag vir jou gewys het, was van Dompeldorius." Sirius uiter 'n kort blaflag. "As my ouers moet weet waarvoor hul huis nou gebruik word. Wel, my ma se portret gee jou 'n idee . . ."

! ly frons 'n oomblik en sug dan.

“Ek sou nie omgee as ek net nou en dan kon uitkom en iets nuttigs doen nie. Ek het vir Dompeldorius gevra of ek saam met jou na jou verhoor kan gaan – as Snuiwer, natuurlik – om jou 'n bietjie morele ondersteuning te gee, hoe voel jy daaroor?”

Harry voel asof sy maag deur die stowwerige mat val. Hy het oedert gisteraand se ete nog nie weer aan die verhoor gedink nie. Die opwinding van terug wees by die mense van wie hy die meeste hou en alles wat hy gehoor het, het dit heeltemal uit sy gedagtes gewis. Sirius se woorde bring die versmorende gevoel van angs terug. Hy staar na Hermien en die Weasleys wat aan hul toebroodjies smul en wonder hoe dit sal voel as hulle sonder hom teruggaan na Hogwarts toe.

“Moenie bekommerd wees nie,” sê Sirius. Harry kyk op en besef dat Sirius hom dopgehou het. “Ek is seker hulle sal jou vryspreek, daar's beslis iets in die Internasionale Statuut op Geheimhouding dat jy mag toor om jou eie lewe te red.”

“Maar as hulle my sou skors,” sê Harry sag, “kan ek dan hier by jou kom woon?”

Sirius glimlag stroef.

“Ons sal sien.”

“Ek sal baie beter oor die verhoor voel as ek weet ek hoef nie terug te gaan na die Dursleys nie,” hou Harry vol.

“Hulle moet baie erg wees as jy hierdie plek verkies,” sê Sirius somber.

“Opskud, julle twee, of daar is geen kos oor nie,” roep mevrou Weasley.

Sirius slaak nog 'n swaar sug en kyk gewalg na die tapisserie voor hy en Harry by die ander aansluit.

Harry doen sy bes om nie aan die verhoor te dink nie terwyl hulle die glasvertoonkaste daardie middag leegmaak. Gelukkig vir hom is dit 'n taak wat baie konsentrasie verg, want die meeste van die goed is traag om hul stowwerige rakke te verlaat. Sirius word lalik deur 'n silwer snuifdosie aan sy hand gebyt. Binne sekondes ontwikkel 'n nare kors soos 'n harde bruin handskoen op sy hand.

“Dis oukei,” sê hy en kyk vol belangstelling daarna voor hy sy hand liggies met sy towerstaf tik en die vel weer normaal word. “Daar moet Vratvelpoeier in wees.”

Hy gooi die dosie in die sak waarin hulle die rommel wat uit die kaste kom, sit. Harry sien hoe George sy hand met 'n lap toedraai en oomblikke later die dosie in sy broeksak steek, wat reeds propvol Doxies is.

Hulle vind 'n silwer instrument wat baie onplesierig lyk, iets soos 'n haartangetjie met 'n klomp bene wat, toe Harry dit optel, soos 'n spinnekop teen sy arm opskarrel en deur sy vel probeer hoor. Sirius gryp dit en slaan dit plat met 'n swaar boek met die titel *Adellikes van die Aarde: 'n Towenaarstamllys*. Daar is 'n musiekdoos wat 'n ietwat sinistere tinkelende deuntjie speel as dit opgewen word, en hulle voel almal vreemd swak en slaperig tot Ginny die verstand het om die deksel toe te klap; 'n swaar hangertjie wat niemand kan oopmaak nie; 'n aantal antieke stempels; en in 'n stowwerige doos 'n Orde van Merlin, Eerste Klas, wat aan Sirius se oupa toegeken is vir "diens aan die Ministerie".

"Dit beteken hy't vir hulle 'n spul goud gegee," sê Sirius minag-tend toe hy die medalje in die vullissak gooi.

Skepsel glip die vertrek 'n paar keer skelm binne en probeer om goed onder sy lende kleed uit te smokkel. Elke keer dat hy betrap word, verwens hy hulle binnensmonds. Toe Sirius 'n groot goue ring met die Swardt-wapen uit sy greep worstel, bars Skepsel woedend in trane uit en storm snikkend weg terwyl hy Sirius woorde toevoeg wat Harry nog nooit tevore gehoor het nie.

"Dit was my pa s'n," sê Sirius en gooi die ring in die sak. "Skepsel was nie heeltemal so toegewy aan hom soos aan my ma nie, maar ek het hom tog nog verlede week betrap waar hy een van my pa se ou broeke probeer steel het."

Mevrou Weasley laat hulle die volgende paar dae baie hard werk. Dit neem drie dae om die sitkamer volledig te ontsmet. Uiteindelik is net die ongewenste tapisserie van die Swardt-stamboom, wat alle pogings fnuik om dit van die muur af te haal, en die ratelende skryftafel nog oor. Moodie was nog nie weer by Hoofkwartier nie, dus weet hulle nog steeds nie wat binne-in is nie.

Hulle versit van die sitkamer na die eetkamer op die grondvloer, waar hulle spinnekoppe so groot soos pierings in die vertoonkas kry (Ron gaan vinnig uit om tee te maak en bly 'n uur en 'n half weg). Die porselein met die Swardt-familiewapen en -leuse word summier deur Sirius in die vullissak gegooi en dieselfde lot tref 'n stel ou foto's in gevlekte silwer rame. Al die gesigte skree skril toe die glas voor hulle breek.

Snerp mag hul werk sarkasties as "skoonmaak" beskryf, maar Harry reken dis eerder oorlogvoering teen die huis wat, met Skepsel se hulp, hom verbete teensit. Waar hulle ook al besig is, verskyn die huiself tussen hulle en probeer om wat hy kan uit die vullissakke te haal. Sy gemompel raak al hoe meer beledigend. Sirius dreig hom

sells met klere, maar Skepsel gee hom 'n waterige kyk en sê: "Meester moet doen wat Meester wil," voor hy wegdraai en hard brom: "maar Meester sal nie vir Skepsel wegjaag nie, nee, want Skepsel weet wat hulle doen, o ja, hy heul teen die Donker Heer, ja, met hierdie Modderbloeders en verraaiers en gemors."

Op hierdie punt, ten spyte van Hermien se krete, gryp Sirius vir Skepsel agter aan sy lendekleed en smyt hom uit die vertrek.

Deur die dag lui die deurklokkie verskeie kere, wat die teken is vir Sirius se ma om te begin skree en vir Harry-hulle om die besoeker te probeer affluister. Maar hulle word min wys uit die bietjies wat hulle sien en die brokkies wat hulle hoor voor mevrou Weasley hulle weer in die werk steek. Snerp kom en gaan 'n paar keer, hoewel Harry hom tot sy verligting nooit van aangesig tot aangesig sien nie. Harry sien ook sy Transfigurasie-onderwyser, professor McGonagall, wat baie snaaks in 'n Moggelrok en -jas lyk, maar sy is oënskynlik te besig om lank te bly.

Soms bly die besoekers egter 'n rukkie om te help. Tonks sluit by hulle aan vir 'n heuglike middag en hulle kry 'n moorddadige ou spook wat in een van die boonste toilette wegkruip. En Lupin, wat saam met Sirius in die huis bly, maar vir lang tye uitgaan op geheime sendings vir die Orde, help hulle om 'n staanhorlosie reg te maak wat die nare gewoonte ontwikkel het om swaar boue na verbygangers te slinger. Mundungus styg effens in mevrou Weasley se aansien toe hy vir Ron red van 'n antieke pers kleed wat hom probeer verwurg toe hy dit uit 'n kas haal.

Hoewel Harry nog steeds sleg slaap en drome oor gange en deure wat gesluit is sy litteken laat prikkel, het hy vir die eerste keer hierdie somer 'n bietjie pret. Solank hy besig is, is hy gelukkig. Wanneer die werk afneem en hy begin ontspan of uitgeput op sy bed lê en na die dowwe bewegende skaduwees teen die plafon kyk, kom die gedagtes aan die dreigende Ministerie-verhoor terug na hom.

Vrees prik sy ingewande soos naalde wanneer hy wonder wat met hom gaan gebeur as hulle hom sou skors. Die gedagte is só vreeslik dat hy nie daaroor durf praat nie, nie eens met Ron en Hermien nie. Hulle sê ook niks, hoewel hy dikwels sien hoe hulle saam fluister en angstig na hom loer. Partykeer kan hy sy verbeelding nie beteuel as dit vir hom 'n gesiglose amptenaar van die Ministerie wys wat sy towerstaf middeldeur breek en hom beveel om terug te gaan na die Dursleys nie. . . . maar hy sal nie. Hy is vasbeslote. Hy sal terugkom na Grimmauldplein en by Sirius kom woon.

Harry voel asof 'n baksteen in sy maag val toe mevrou Weasley die Woensdagaand aan tafel na hom draai en gedemp sê: "Ek het jou

beste klere vir môreoggend gestryk, Harry, en ek wil hê jy moet vanaand jou hare was. 'n Goeie eerste indruk kan wondere verrig."

Ron, Hermien, Fred, George en Ginny hou almal op met praat en kyk na hom. Harry knik en probeer om sy tjop klaar te eet, maar sy mond is so droog dat hy skaars kan kou.

"Hoe gaan ek daar kom?" vra hy vir mevrou Weasley en probeer onbesorg klink.

"Arthur gaan jou saam met hom werk toe neem," sê mevrou Weasley simpatiek.

Meneer Weasley glimlag bemoedigend vir Harry oor die tafel.

"Jy kan in my kantoor wag tot dit tyd is vir die verhoor," sê hy.

Harry kyk na Sirius, maar mevrou Weasley beantwoord die vraag nog voor hy dit kan vra.

"Professor Dompeldorius dink nie dis 'n goeie idee dat Sirius saam met jou gaan nie, en ek moet sê ek –"

"– dink hy's heeltemal reg," sê Sirius deur geklemde kake.

Mevrou Weasley pers haar lippe saam.

"Wanneer het Dompeldorius dit vir jou gesê?" vra Harry en staar na Sirius.

"Hy was laas nag hier toe julle al in die bed was," sê meneer Weasley.

Sirius steek iesegrimmig met sy vurk na 'n aartappel. Harry laat sak sy oë na sy bord. Die gedagte dat Dompeldorius die aand voor sy verhoor in die huis was en nie eens gevra het om hom te sien nie, laat hom, indien moontlik, nog erger voel.

CHAPTER SEVEN



THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Harry awoke at half-past five the next morning as abruptly and completely as if somebody had yelled in his ear. For a few moments he lay immobile as the prospect of the hearing filled every tiny particle of his brain, then, unable to bear it, he leapt out of bed and put on his glasses. Mrs. Weasley had laid out his freshly laundered jeans and T-shirt at the foot of his bed. Harry scrambled into them. The blank picture on the wall sniggered again.

Ron was lying sprawled on his back with his mouth wide open, fast asleep. He did not stir as Harry crossed the room, stepped out onto the landing, and closed the door softly behind him. Trying not to

think of the next time he would see Ron, when they might no longer be fellow students at Hogwarts, Harry walked quietly down the stairs, past the heads of Kreacher's ancestors, and into the kitchen.

He had expected it to be empty, but it was not. When he reached the door he heard the soft rumble of voices on the other side and when he pushed it open he saw Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Sirius, Lupin, and Tonks sitting there almost as though they were waiting for him. All were fully dressed except Mrs. Weasley, who was wearing a quilted, purple dressing gown. She leapt to her feet the moment he entered.

"Breakfast," she said as she pulled out her wand and hurried over to the fire.

"M-m-morning, Harry," yawned Tonks. Her hair was blonde and curly this morning. "Sleep all right?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"I've b-b-been up all night," she said, with another shuddering yawn. "Come and sit down . . ."

She drew out a chair, knocking over the one beside it in the process.

"What do you want, Harry?" Mrs. Weasley called. "Porridge? Muffins? Kippers? Bacon and eggs? Toast?"

"Just — just toast, thanks," said Harry.

Lupin glanced at Harry, then said to Tonks, "What were you saying about Scrimgeour?"

"Oh . . . yeah . . . well, we need to be a bit more careful, he's been asking Kingsley and me funny questions . . ."

Harry felt vaguely grateful that he was not required to join in the

conversation. His insides were squirming. Mrs. Weasley placed a couple of pieces of toast and marmalade in front of him; he tried to eat, but it was like chewing carpet. Mrs. Weasley sat down on his other side and started fussing with his T-shirt, tucking in the label and smoothing out creases across the shoulders. He wished she wouldn't.

"... and I'll have to tell Dumbledore I can't do night duty tomorrow, I'm just t-t-too tired," Tonks finished, yawning hugely again.

"I'll cover for you," said Mr. Weasley. "I'm okay, I've got a report to finish anyway..."

Mr. Weasley was not wearing wizard's robes but a pair of pin-striped trousers and an old bomber jacket. He turned from Tonks to Harry.

"How are you feeling?"

Harry shrugged.

"It'll all be over soon," Mr. Weasley said bracingly. "In a few hours' time you'll be cleared."

Harry said nothing.

"The hearing's on my floor, in Amelia Bones's office. She's Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and she's the one who'll be questioning you."

"Amelia Bones is okay, Harry," said Tonks earnestly. "She's fair, she'll hear you out."

Harry nodded, still unable to think of anything to say.

"Don't lose your temper," said Sirius abruptly. "Be polite and stick to the facts."

Harry nodded again.

"The law's on your side," said Lupin quietly. "Even underage wizards are allowed to use magic in life-threatening situations."

Something very cold trickled down the back of Harry's neck; for a moment he thought someone was putting a Disillusionment Charm on him again, then he realized that Mrs. Weasley was attacking his hair with a wet comb. She pressed hard on the top of his head.

"Doesn't it ever lie flat?" she said desperately.

Harry shook his head.

Mr. Weasley checked his watch and looked up at Harry.

"I think we'll go now," he said. "We're a bit early, but I think you'll be better off there than hanging around here."

"Okay," said Harry automatically, dropping his toast and getting to his feet.

"You'll be all right, Harry," said Tonks, patting him on the arm.

"Good luck," said Lupin. "I'm sure it will be fine."

"And if it's not," said Sirius grimly, "I'll see to Amelia Bones for you . . ."

Harry smiled weakly. Mrs. Weasley hugged him.

"We've all got our fingers crossed," she said.

"Right," said Harry. "Well . . . see you later then."

He followed Mr. Weasley upstairs and along the hall. He could hear Sirius's mother grunting in her sleep behind her curtains. Mr. Weasley unbolted the door and they stepped out into the cold, gray dawn.

"You don't normally walk to work, do you?" Harry asked him, as they set off briskly around the square.

“No, I usually Apparate,” said Mr. Weasley, “but obviously you can’t, and I think it’s best we arrive in a thoroughly non-magical fashion . . . makes a better impression, given what you’re being disciplined for . . .”

Mr. Weasley kept his hand inside his jacket as they walked. Harry knew it was clenched around his wand. The run-down streets were almost deserted, but when they arrived at the miserable little Underground station they found it already full of early morning commuters. As ever when he found himself in close proximity to Muggles going about their daily business, Mr. Weasley was hard put to contain his enthusiasm.

“Simply fabulous,” he whispered, indicating the automatic ticket machines. “Wonderfully ingenious.”

“They’re out of order,” said Harry, pointing at the sign.

“Yes, but even so . . .” said Mr. Weasley, beaming fondly at them.

They bought their tickets instead from a sleepy-looking guard (Harry handled the transaction, as Mr. Weasley was not very good with Muggle money) and five minutes later they were boarding an Underground train that rattled them off toward the center of London. Mr. Weasley kept anxiously checking and rechecking the Underground map above the windows.

“Four stops, Harry . . . three stops left now . . . two stops to go, Harry . . .”

They got off at a station in the very heart of London, swept from the train in a tide of besuited men and women carrying briefcases. Up the escalator they went, through the ticket barrier (Mr. Weasley delighted with the way the stile swallowed his ticket), and emerged

onto a broad street lined with imposing-looking buildings, already full of traffic.

“Where are we?” said Mr. Weasley blankly, and for one heart-stopping moment Harry thought they had gotten off at the wrong station despite Mr. Weasley’s continual references to the map; but a second later he said, “Ah yes . . . this way, Harry,” and led him down a side road.

“Sorry,” he said, “but I never come by train and it all looks rather different from a Muggle perspective. As a matter of fact I’ve never even used the visitor’s entrance before.”

The farther they walked, the smaller and less imposing the buildings became, until finally they reached a street that contained several rather shabby-looking offices, a pub, and an overflowing dumpster. Harry had expected a rather more impressive location for the Ministry of Magic.

“Here we are,” said Mr. Weasley brightly, pointing at an old red telephone box, which was missing several panes of glass and stood before a heavily graffitied wall. “After you, Harry.”

He opened the telephone box door.

Harry stepped inside, wondering what on earth this was about. Mr. Weasley folded himself in beside Harry and closed the door. It was a tight fit; Harry was jammed against the telephone apparatus, which was hanging crookedly from the wall as though a vandal had tried to rip it off. Mr. Weasley reached past Harry for the receiver.

“Mr. Weasley, I think this might be out of order too,” Harry said.

“No, no, I’m sure it’s fine,” said Mr. Weasley, holding the receiver above his head and peering at the dial. “Let’s see . . . six . . .” he

dialled the number, “two . . . four . . . and another four . . . and another two . . .”

As the dial whirred smoothly back into place, a cool female voice sounded inside the telephone box, not from the receiver in Mr. Weasley’s hand, but as loudly and plainly as though an invisible woman were standing right beside them.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business.”

“Er . . .” said Mr. Weasley, clearly uncertain whether he should talk into the receiver or not; he compromised by holding the mouthpiece to his ear, “Arthur Weasley, Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, here to escort Harry Potter, who has been asked to attend a disciplinary hearing . . .”

“Thank you,” said the cool female voice. “Visitor, please take the badge and attach it to the front of your robes.”

There was a click and a rattle, and Harry saw something slide out of the metal chute where returned coins usually appeared. He picked it up: It was a square silver badge with *Harry Potter, Disciplinary Hearing* on it. He pinned it to the front of his T-shirt as the female voice spoke again.

“Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium.”

The floor of the telephone box shuddered. They were sinking slowly into the ground. Harry watched apprehensively as the pavement rose up past the glass windows of the telephone box until darkness closed over their heads. Then he could see nothing at all; he

could only hear a dull grinding noise as the telephone box made its way down through the earth. After about a minute, though it felt much longer to Harry, a chink of golden light illuminated his feet and, widening, rose up his body, until it hit him in the face and he had to blink to stop his eyes from watering.

“The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day,” said the woman’s voice.

The door of the telephone box sprang open and Mr. Weasley stepped out of it, followed by Harry, whose mouth had fallen open.

They were standing at one end of a very long and splendid hall with a highly polished, dark wood floor. The peacock-blue ceiling was inlaid with gleaming golden symbols that were continually moving and changing like some enormous heavenly notice board. The walls on each side were paneled in shiny dark wood and had many gilded fireplaces set into them. Every few seconds a witch or wizard would emerge from one of the left-hand fireplaces with a soft *whoosh*; on the right-hand side, short queues of wizards were forming before each fireplace, waiting to depart.

Halfway down the hall was a fountain. A group of golden statues, larger than life-size, stood in the middle of a circular pool. Tallest of them all was a noble-looking wizard with his wand pointing straight up in the air. Grouped around him were a beautiful witch, a centaur, a goblin, and a house-elf. The last three were all looking adoringly up at the witch and wizard. Glittering jets of water were flying from the ends of the two wands, the point of the centaur’s arrow, the tip of the goblin’s hat, and each of the house-elf’s ears, so that the tinkling hiss of falling water was added to the pops and cracks of Apparators and

the clatter of footsteps as hundreds of witches and wizards, most of whom were wearing glum, early-morning looks, strode toward a set of golden gates at the far end of the hall.

“This way,” said Mr. Weasley.

They joined the throng, wending their way between the Ministry workers, some of whom were carrying tottering piles of parchment, others battered briefcases, still others reading the *Daily Prophet* as they walked. As they passed the fountain Harry saw silver Sickles and bronze Knuts glinting up at him from the bottom of the pool. A small, smudged sign beside it read:

All proceeds from the Fountain of Magical Brethren will be given to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries

If I'm not expelled from Hogwarts, I'll put in ten Galleons, Harry found himself thinking desperately.

“Over here, Harry,” said Mr. Weasley, and they stepped out of the stream of Ministry employees heading for the golden gates, toward a desk on the left, over which hung a sign saying SECURITY. A badly shaven wizard in peacock-blue robes looked up as they approached and put down his *Daily Prophet*.

“I'm escorting a visitor,” said Mr. Weasley, gesturing toward Harry.

“Step over here,” said the wizard in a bored voice.

Harry walked closer to him and the wizard held up a long golden rod, thin and flexible as a car aerial, and passed it up and down Harry's front and back.

“Wand,” grunted the security wizard at Harry, putting down the golden instrument and holding out his hand.

Harry produced his wand. The wizard dropped it onto a strange brass instrument, which looked something like a set of scales with only one dish. It began to vibrate. A narrow strip of parchment came speeding out of a slit in the base. The wizard tore this off and read the writing upon it.

“Eleven inches, phoenix-feather core, been in use four years. That correct?”

“Yes,” said Harry nervously.

“I keep this,” said the wizard, impaling the slip of parchment on a small brass spike. “You get this back,” he added, thrusting the wand at Harry.

“Thank you.”

“Hang on . . .” said the wizard slowly.

His eyes had darted from the silver visitor’s badge on Harry’s chest to his forehead.

“Thank you, Eric,” said Mr. Weasley firmly, and grasping Harry by the shoulder, he steered him away from the desk and back into the stream of wizards and witches walking through the golden gates.

Jostled slightly by the crowd, Harry followed Mr. Weasley through the gates into the smaller hall beyond, where at least twenty lifts stood behind wrought golden grilles. Harry and Mr. Weasley joined the crowd around one of them. A big, bearded wizard holding a large cardboard box stood nearby. The box was emitting rasping noises.

“All right, Arthur?” said the wizard, nodding at Mr. Weasley.

“What’ve you got there, Bob?” asked Mr. Weasley, looking at the

box.

“We’re not sure,” said the wizard seriously. “We thought it was a bog-standard chicken until it started breathing fire. Looks like a serious breach of the Ban on Experimental Breeding to me.”

With a great jangling and clattering a lift descended in front of them; the golden grille slid back and Harry and Mr. Weasley moved inside it with the rest of the crowd. Harry found himself jammed against the back wall of the lift. Several witches and wizards were looking at him curiously; he stared at his feet to avoid catching anyone’s eye, flattening his fringe as he did so. The grilles slid shut with a crash and the lift ascended slowly, chains rattling all the while, while the same cool female voice Harry had heard in the telephone box rang out again.

“Level seven, Department of Magical Games and Sports, incorporating the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters, Official Gobstones Club, and Ludicrous Patents Office.”

The lift doors opened; Harry glimpsed an untidy-looking corridor, with various posters of Quidditch teams tacked lopsidedly on the walls; one of the wizards in the lift, who was carrying an armful of broomsticks, extricated himself with difficulty and disappeared down the corridor. The doors closed, the lift juddered upward again, and the woman’s voice said, “Level six, Department of Magical Transport, incorporating the Floo Network Authority, Broom Regulatory Control, Portkey Office, and Apparation Test Center.”

Once again the lift doors opened and four or five witches and wizards got out; at the same time, several paper airplanes swooped into the lift. Harry stared up at them as they flapped idly around

above his head; they were a pale violet color and he could see MINISTRY OF MAGIC stamped along the edges of their wings.

“Just Interdepartmental memos,” Mr. Weasley muttered to him. “We used to use owls, but the mess was unbelievable . . . droppings all over the desks . . .”

As they clattered upward again, the memos flapped around the swaying lamp in the lift’s ceiling.

“Level five, Department of International Magical Cooperation, incorporating the International Magical Trading Standards Body, the International Magical Office of Law, and the International Confederation of Wizards, British Seats.”

When the doors opened, two of the memos zoomed out with a few more witches and wizards, but several more memos zoomed in, so that the light from the lamp in the ceiling flickered and flashed as they darted around it.

“Level four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being, and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office, and Pest Advisory Bureau.”

“‘S’cuse,” said the wizard carrying the fire-breathing chicken and he left the lift pursued by a little flock of memos. The doors clanged shut yet again.

“Level three, Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, including the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, Obliviator Headquarters, and Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee.”

Everybody left the lift on this floor except Mr. Weasley, Harry, and a witch who was reading an extremely long piece of parchment that was trailing on the ground. The remaining memos continued to soar

around the lamp as the lift juddered upward again, and then the doors opened and the voice said, "Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services."

"This is us, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, and they followed the witch out of the lift into a corridor lined with doors. "My office is on the other side of the floor."

"Mr. Weasley," said Harry, as they passed a window through which sunlight was streaming, "aren't we underground?"

"Yes, we are," said Mr. Weasley, "those are enchanted windows; Magical Maintenance decide what weather we're getting every day. We had two months of hurricanes last time they were angling for a pay raise. . . . Just round here, Harry."

They turned a corner, walked through a pair of heavy oak doors, and emerged in a cluttered, open area divided into cubicles, which were buzzing with talk and laughter. Memos were zooming in and out of cubicles like miniature rockets. A lopsided sign on the nearest cubicle read AUROR HEADQUARTERS.

Harry looked surreptitiously through the doorways as they passed. The Aurors had covered their cubicle walls with everything from pictures of wanted wizards and photographs of their families, to posters of their favorite Quidditch teams and articles from the *Daily Prophet*. A scarlet-robed man with a ponytail longer than Bill's was sitting with his boots up on his desk, dictating a report to his quill. A little farther along, a witch with a patch over her eye was talking over the top of her cubicle wall to Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Morning, Weasley," said Kingsley carelessly, as they drew

nearer. "I've been wanting a word with you, have you got a second?"

"Yes, if it really is a second," said Mr. Weasley, "I'm in rather a hurry."

They were talking to each other as though they hardly knew each other, and when Harry opened his mouth to say hello to Kingsley, Mr. Weasley stood on his foot. They followed Kingsley along the row and into the very last cubicle.

Harry received a slight shock; Sirius's face was blinking down at him from every direction. Newspaper cuttings and old photographs — even the one of Sirius being best man at the Potters' wedding — papered the walls. The only Sirius-free space was a map of the world in which little red pins were glowing like jewels.

"Here," said Kingsley brusquely to Mr. Weasley, shoving a sheaf of parchment into his hand, "I need as much information as possible on flying Muggle vehicles sighted in the last twelve months. We've received information that Black might still be using his old motorcycle."

Kingsley tipped Harry an enormous wink and added, in a whisper, "Give him the magazine, he might find it interesting." Then he said in normal tones, "And don't take too long, Weasley, the delay on that firelegs report held our investigation up for a month."

"If you had read my report you would know that the term is 'firearms,'" said Mr. Weasley coolly. "And I'm afraid you'll have to wait for information on motorcycles, we're extremely busy at the moment." He dropped his voice and said, "If you can get away before seven, Molly's making meatballs."

He beckoned to Harry and led him out of Kingsley's cubicle,

through a second set of oak doors, into another passage, turned left, marched along another corridor, turned right into a dimly lit and distinctly shabby corridor, and finally reached a dead end, where a door on the left stood ajar, revealing a broom cupboard, and a door on the right bore a tarnished brass plaque reading MISUSE OF MUGGLE ARTIFACTS.

Mr. Weasley's dingy office seemed to be slightly smaller than the broom cupboard. Two desks had been crammed inside it and there was barely room to move around them because of all the overflowing filing cabinets lining the walls, on top of which were tottering piles of files. The little wall space available bore witness to Mr. Weasley's obsessions; there were several posters of cars, including one of a dismantled engine, two illustrations of postboxes he seemed to have cut out of Muggle children's books, and a diagram showing how to wire a plug.

Sitting on top of Mr. Weasley's overflowing in-tray was an old toaster that was hiccuping in a disconsolate way and a pair of empty leather gloves that were twiddling their thumbs. A photograph of the Weasley family stood beside the in-tray. Harry noticed that Percy appeared to have walked out of it.

"We haven't got a window," said Mr. Weasley apologetically, taking off his bomber jacket and placing it on the back of his chair. "We've asked, but they don't seem to think we need one. Have a seat, Harry, doesn't look as if Perkins is in yet."

Harry squeezed himself into the chair behind Perkins's desk while Mr. Weasley rifled through the sheaf of parchment Kingsley Shacklebolt had given him.

“Ah,” he said, grinning, as he extracted a copy of a magazine entitled *The Quibbler* from its midst, “yes . . .” He flicked through it. “Yes, he’s right, I’m sure Sirius will find that very amusing — oh dear, what’s this now?”

A memo had just zoomed in through the open door and fluttered to rest on top of the hiccuping toaster. Mr. Weasley unfolded it and read aloud, “‘Third regurgitating public toilet reported in Bethnal Green, kindly investigate immediately.’ This is getting ridiculous . . .”

“A regurgitating toilet?”

“Anti-Muggle pranksters,” said Mr. Weasley, frowning. “We had two last week, one in Wimbledon, one in Elephant and Castle. Muggles are pulling the flush and instead of everything disappearing — well, you can imagine. The poor things keep calling in those — those *pumbles*, I think they’re called — you know, the ones who mend pipes and things —”

“Plumbers?”

“— exactly, yes, but of course they’re flummoxed. I only hope we can catch whoever’s doing it.”

“Will it be Aurors who catch them?”

“Oh no, this is too trivial for Aurors, it’ll be the ordinary Magical Law Enforcement Patrol — ah, Harry, this is Perkins.”

A stooped, timid-looking old wizard with fluffy white hair had just entered the room, panting.

“Oh Arthur!” he said desperately, without looking at Harry. “Thank goodness, I didn’t know what to do for the best, whether to wait here for you or not, I’ve just sent an owl to your home but you’ve obviously missed it — an urgent message came ten minutes ago —”

“I know about the regurgitating toilet,” said Mr. Weasley.

“No, no, it’s not the toilet, it’s the Potter boy’s hearing — they’ve changed the time and venue — it starts at eight o’clock now and it’s down in old Courtroom Ten —”

“Down in old — but they told me — Merlin’s beard —”

Mr. Weasley looked at his watch, let out a yelp, and leapt from his chair.

“Quick, Harry, we should have been there five minutes ago!”

Perkins flattened himself against the filing cabinets as Mr. Weasley left the office at a run, Harry on his heels.

“Why have they changed the time?” Harry said breathlessly as they hurtled past the Auror cubicles; people poked out their heads and stared as they streaked past. Harry felt as though he had left all his insides back at Perkins’s desk.

“I’ve no idea, but thank goodness we got here so early, if you’d missed it it would have been catastrophic!”

Mr. Weasley skidded to a halt beside the lifts and jabbed impatiently at the down button.

“Come ON!”

The lift clattered into view and they hurried inside. Every time it stopped Mr. Weasley cursed furiously and pummelled the number nine button.

“Those courtrooms haven’t been used in years,” said Mr. Weasley angrily. “I can’t think why they’re doing it down there — unless — but no . . .”

A plump witch carrying a smoking goblet entered the lift at that moment, and Mr. Weasley did not elaborate.

“The Atrium,” said the cool female voice and the golden grilles slid open, showing Harry a distant glimpse of the golden statues in the fountain. The plump witch got out and a sallow-skinned wizard with a very mournful face got in.

“Morning, Arthur,” he said in a sepulchral voice as the lift began to descend. “Don’t often see you down here . . .”

“Urgent business, Bode,” said Mr. Weasley, who was bouncing on the balls of his feet and throwing anxious looks over at Harry.

“Ah, yes,” said Bode, surveying Harry unblinkingly. “Of course.”

Harry barely had emotion to spare for Bode, but his unfaltering gaze did not make him feel any more comfortable.

“Department of Mysteries,” said the cool female voice, and left it at that.

“Quick, Harry,” said Mr. Weasley as the lift doors rattled open, and they sped up a corridor that was quite different from those above. The walls were bare; there were no windows and no doors apart from a plain black one set at the very end of the corridor. Harry expected them to go through it, but instead Mr. Weasley seized him by the arm and dragged him to the left, where there was an opening leading to a flight of steps.

“Down here, down here,” panted Mr. Weasley, taking two steps at a time. “The lift doesn’t even come down this far . . . *why* they’re doing it there . . .”

They reached the bottom of the steps and ran along yet another corridor, which bore a great resemblance to that which led to Snape’s dungeon at Hogwarts, with rough stone walls and torches in brackets. The doors they passed here were heavy wooden ones with

iron bolts and keyholes.

“Courtroom . . . ten . . . I think . . . we’re nearly . . . yes.”

Mr. Weasley stumbled to a halt outside a grimy dark door with an immense iron lock and slumped against the wall, clutching at a stitch in his chest.

“Go on,” he panted, pointing his thumb at the door. “Get in there.”

“Aren’t — aren’t you coming with — ?”

“No, no, I’m not allowed. Good luck!”

Harry’s heart was beating a violent tattoo against his Adam’s apple. He swallowed hard, turned the heavy iron door handle, and stepped inside the courtroom.

Die Ministerie vir Towerkuns

Harry skrik die volgende oggend om halfses so skielik en helder wakker asof iemand in sy oor geskree het. Vir 'n paar oomblikke lê hy roerloos terwyl sy vrees vir die dissiplinêre verhoor elke greintjie van sy wese vul. Toe hy dit nie meer kan verduur nie, spring hy uit die bed en sit sy bril op. Mevrouw Weasley het 'n paar jeans en 'n vars gestrykte T-hemp op sy bed se voetenent neergesit en Harry trek dit vinnig aan. Die lêe portretraam teen die muur giggel.

Ron lê op die naat van sy rug met sy mond wyd oop, vas aan die slaap. Hy roer nie toe Harry deur die vertrek loop na die trappor-taal en die kamerdeur saggies agter hom toemaak nie. Hy stap suut-jies met die trappe af, verby Skepsel se voorvaders se koppe, af na die kombuis en probeer om nie daaraan te dink dat wanneer hy en Ron mekaar weer sien, hulle dalk nie meer medestudente by Hog-warts sal wees nie.

Hy het gedink die kombuis gaan leeg wees, maar toe hy by die deur kom, hoor hy die gedempte gerammel van stemme aan die binnekant. Hy stoot die deur oop en sien meneer en mevrou Weasley, Sirius, Lupin en Tonks. Dit lyk of hulle vir hom sit en wag het. Almal is al aangetrek behalwe mevrou Weasley, wat 'n pers kwiltkamerjas aanhet. Die oomblik toe Harry inkom, spring sy orent.

“Ontbyt,” sê sy, haal haar towerstaf uit en stap vinnig na die vuur.

“M – m – môre, Harry,” gaap Tonks. Haar hare is vanoggend blond en krullerig. “Lekker geslaap?”

“Ja,” sê Harry.

“Ek w – w – was die hele nag op,” sê sy, met nog 'n sidderende gaap. “Kom sit hier.”

Sy trek 'n stoel uit en stamp die een langsaan in die proses om.

“Waarvoor is jy lus, Harry?” roep mevrou Weasley. “Pap? Muffins? Kippers? Spek en eiers? Roosterbrood?”

“Net – net roosterbrood, dankie,” sê Harry.

Lupin kyk vlugtig na Harry. Dan sê hy vir Tonks: “Wat het jy daar oor Scrimgeour gesê?”

“O ja wel, ons moet ’n bietjie versigtiger wees, hy vra allerhande snaakse vrae vir my en Kingsley.”

Harry voel nogal verlig dat hy nie moet saamgesels nie. Sy ingewande draai. Mevrouw Weasley sit ’n paar snye roosterbrood en marmelade voor hom neer. Hy probeer eet, maar dis of hy ’n stuk tapyt kou. Mevrouw Weasley kom sit langs hom en vroetel met sy T-hemp, slaan die etiket terug en stryk die plooi op sy skouers reg. Hy wens sy wil ophou.

“... en ek sal vir Dompeldorius moet sê ek kan nie môre nagdiens doen nie, ek’s net t – t – te moeg,” eindig Tonks met ’n groot gaap.

“Ek sal jou uithelp,” sê meneer Weasley. “Ek’s oukei, en ek moet in elk geval ’n verslag klaarmaak.”

Meneer Weasley dra nie ’n towenaarskleed nie, maar ’n strepiesbroek en ’n ou vliegbaadjie. Hy kyk van Tonks na Harry.

“Hoe voel jy?”

Harry haal sy skouers op.

“Dit sal alles gou verby wees,” sê meneer Weasley bemoedigend. “Oor ’n paar uur sal jy vrygespreek word.”

Harry sê niks.

“Die verhoor is op my verdieping in Amelia Bones se kantoor. Sy’s die hoof van die Departement vir Towerwetstoepassing en die een wat jou sal ondervra.”

“Amelia Bones is oukei, Harry,” sê Tonks ernstig. “Sy’s regverdig. Sy sal na jou luister.”

Harry knik. Hy kan nog steeds nie aan iets dink om te sê nie.

“Moenie jou humeur verloor nie,” sê Sirius skielik. “Wees hoflik en hou by die feite.”

Harry knik weer.

“Die wet is aan jou kant,” sê Lupin kalm. “Selfs minderjarige towenaars mag in lewensbedreigende omstandighede toor.”

Iets kouds drup in Harry se nek af. Vir ’n oomblik dink hy dat iemand ’n Ontgogelingstowerspreuk oor hom uitgespreek het, dan besef hy dis mevrou Weasley wat sy hare met ’n nat kam aanval. Sy druk hard bo-op sy kop.

“Lê dit ooit plat?” vra sy radeloos.

Harry skud sy kop.

Meneer Weasley kyk na sy horlosie en toe na Harry.

“Ek stel voor ons gaan nou,” sê hy. “Ons is ’n bietjie vroeg, maar ek dink jy sal beter daaraan toe wees by die Ministerie as dat jy hier rondhang.”

“Oukei,” sê Harry outomaties, los sy roosterbrood en staan op.

“Alles sal regkom, jy sal sien, Harry,” sê Tonks en gee hom ’n klippie teen die arm.

“Sterkte,” sê Lupin. “Ek is seker dit sal goed gaan.”

“En indien nie,” sê Sirius grimmig, “sal ek Amelia Bones namens jou gaan sien.”

Harry glimlag floutjies. Mevrouw Weasley omhels hom.

“Ons hou vir jou duim vas,” sê sy.

“Goed,” sê Harry. “Wel . . . sien julle later.”

Hy volg meneer Weasley boontoe en deur die voorportaal. Hy hoor hoe Sirius se ma in haar slaap agter die gordyne brom. Meneer Weasley sluit die voordeur oop en hulle stap uit in die koue, grys oggend.

“Jy stap nie gewoonlik werk toe nie, nè?” vra Harry.

“Nee, ek appareer gewoonlik,” sê meneer Weasley, “maar jy kan mos nie en ek dink dis beter dat ons op ’n totaal nietowermanier daar opdaag . . . Maak ’n beter indruk in die lig van jou dissiplinêre ondersoek.”

Meneer Weasley hou sy hand in sy baadjiesak terwyl hulle stap. Harry weet sy hand is om sy towerstaf geklem. Die verwaarloosde strate is feitlik verlate, maar toe hulle by die mistroostige moltrein-stasie kom, is dit reeds vol vroegoggendpendelaars. Soos gewoonlik wanneer hy tussen Moggels in hulle alledaagse lewe is, betuel meneer Weasley sy entoesiasme met moeite.

“Absoluut ongelooflik,” fluister hy en beduie na die outomatiese kaartjemasjiene. “Werklik vernuftig.”

“Hulle werk nie,” sê Harry en wys na die bordjie.

“Ja, maar nog steeds . . .” sê meneer Weasley en kyk liefderik daarna.

Hulle koop hul kaartjies by ’n slaperige wag (Harry hanteer die transaksie omdat meneer Weasley nie baie goed met Moggelgeld is nie) en vyf minute later gaan hulle aan boord van ’n moltrein wat met hulle na Londen se middestad ratel. Meneer Weasley hou die roetekaart bo hul koppe angstig dop.

“Nog vier stoppe, Harry. Drie stoppe oor . . . Twee stoppe om te gaan, Harry.”

Hulle klim by ’n stasie in die hart van Londen af en word mee-gesleur deur ’n stroom mans in pakke en vroue met aktetasse. Hulle gaan op met die roltrappe, deur die kaartjieslagboom (meneer Weasley verlekker hom daarin toe sy kaartjie ingesluk word) en uit na ’n breë straat omsoom met imposante geboue. Die straat woel reeds vol verkeer.

“Waar is ons?” sê meneer Weasley beteuterd en vir een benoude

oomblik dink Harry hulle het by die verkeerde stasie afgeklim ten spyte van al die kere dat meneer Weasley na die kaart verwys het. 'n Sekonde later sê meneer Weasley: "A ja . . . hierdie kant toe, Harry," en lei hom in 'n systraat af.

"Jammer," sê hy, "maar ek kom nooit met die trein in nie en alles lyk baie anders uit 'n Moggelperspektief. Om die waarheid te sê, ek het die besoekersingang nog nooit gebruik nie."

Hoe verder hulle stap, hoe smaller en minder indrukwekkend raak die geboue, tot hulle eindelijk by 'n straat kom met verskeie verwaarloosde kantore, 'n kroeg en 'n vullisbak wat oorloop. Harry het 'n meer indrukwekkende omgewing vir die Ministerie vir Towerkuns verwag.

"Hier is ons," sê meneer Weasley vrolik en wys na 'n rooi telefoonhokkie met stukkende ruite voor 'n muur vol graffiti. "Ná jou, Harry," sê hy en maak die telefoonhokkie se deur oop.

Harry stap in terwyl hy wonder wat op aarde nou gaan gebeur. Meneer Weasley wikkel langs hom in en maak die deur toe. Dis baie nou en Harry word teen 'n telefoonapparaat gedruk wat skeef uit die muur hang asof 'n vandaal dit probeer uitruk het. Meneer Weasley steek sy arm uit na die gehoorbuis.

"Meneer Weasley, ek dink dit werk ook nie," sê Harry.

"Nee, nee, ek's seker dit werk," sê meneer Weasley. Hy hou die gehoorbuis bo sy kop en tuur na die draaiskyf. "Laat ek sien . . . ses . . ." hy skakel die nommer, "twee . . . vier . . . en nog 'n vier . . . en nog 'n twee . . ."

Toe die draaiskyf terugdraai, praat 'n koel vrouestem in die telefoonhokkie, nie uit die gehoorbuis in meneer Weasley se hand nie, maar helder en duidelik asof 'n onsigbare mens by hulle staan.

"Welkom by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns. Vermeld asseblief jou naam en vir wie jy kom besoek."

"Hm . . ." sê meneer Weasley, duidelik onseker of hy in die gehoorbuis moet praat of nie. Hy kom tot 'n vergelyk deur die praatkant teen sy oor te hou. "Arthur Weasley, Kantoor vir die Misbruik van Moggelartefakte, is hier saam met Harry Potter wat gevra is om 'n dissiplinêre verhoor . . ."

"Dankie," sê die koel vrouestem. "Besoeker, neem asseblief die lapelbalkie en speld dit vooraan jou kleed."

Daar is 'n klik en 'n geratel en Harry sien hoe iets uit die metaalgleufie glip waaruit die kleingeld gewoonlik kom. Hy tel dit op. Dis 'n vierkantige silwer balkie waarop *Harry Potter, dissiplinêre verhoor* staan. Hy steek dit vooraan sy T-hemp vas terwyl die koel vrouestem verder praat.

“Besoekeer aan die Ministerie, jy sal deursoek word en jou towerstaf vir registrasie oorhandig by die sekuriteitstonbank in die verste kant van die Atrium.”

Die vloer van die telefoonhokkie skud en hulle begin stadig in die grond sink. Harry skrik toe hy sien hoe die sypaadjie verby die telefoonhokkie se glasvensters beweeg totdat dit donker is bo hul koppe. Daarna sien hy niks. Hy hoor slegs 'n dowwe knarsgeluid soos die telefoonhokkie deur die aardkors beweeg. Ongeveer 'n minuut later, hoewel dit vir Harry baie langer gevoel het, val 'n skretlike goue lig op sy voete. Dit word breër en beweeg op teen sy lyf tot dit hom vol in die gesig tref en hy sy oë moet knipper sodat dit moet ophou traan.

“Die Ministerie vir Towerkuns wens julle 'n aangename dag toe,” sê die koel vrouestem.

Die telefoonhokkie se deur spring oop en meneer Weasley klim uit, gevolg deur Harry wie se mond oopval.

Hulle staan aan die punt van 'n baie lang, deftige portaal met 'n blink gepoleerde donker houtvloer. Die poublou plafon is ingelê met glimmende goue simbole wat gedurig beweeg en verander soos 'n enorme kennisgewingbord aan die uitspansel. Die mure aan elke kant het glansende donker houtpanele en 'n groot klomp vergulde ingeboude kaggels. Kort-kort verskyn 'n heks of towenaar met 'n sagte *whoesj* uit een van die kaggels aan die linkerkant. Aan die regterkant wag kort toue voor elke kaggel, gereed om te vertrek.

In die middel van die portaal is 'n fontein. 'n Groep standbeelde, groter as lewensgroot, staan in die middel van 'n ronde poel. 'n Towenaar met 'n edele voorkoms troon bo almal uit; sy towerstaf wys regop in die lug. Om hom staan 'n beeldskone heks, 'n sentour, 'n gnoom en 'n huiself gegroepeer. Die laaste drie kyk vol bewondering na die heks en towenaar. Glinsterende waterstrale spuit uit die punte van hul towerstawwe, die punt van die sentour se boog, die punt van die gnoom se hoed en uit elkeen van die huiself se ore. Die tinkelende suising van die vallende water meng met die plof- en klapgeluide van apparereiders en die klaterende voetstappe van honderde hekse en towenaars. Die meeste lyk bedruk en net half wakker. Hulle stap na 'n stel goue hekke aan die verste kant van die portaal.

“Hierdie kant toe,” sê meneer Weasley.

Hulle sluit by die massa aan en vleg deur die Ministerie-werkers. Party dra wankelende stapels perkament, ander verweerde akte-tasse, nog ander lees die *Daaglikse Profeet* terwyl hulle stap. Toe hulle verby die fontein loop, sien Harry silwer Sekels en brons

Knoete op die bodem van die poel blink. 'n Klein gevlekte bordjie langsaan sê:

DIE OPBRENGS VAN DIE FONTEIN VAN DIE TOWERGE-
BROEDERS SAL AAN DIE SINT MUNGO'S-HOSPITAAL VIR
MAGIESE KWINTE EN KWALE GESKENK WORD.

As ek nie uit Hogwarts geskors word nie, gooi ek tien Galjoene in, dink Harry wanhopig.

"Hierdie kant toe, Harry," sê meneer Weasley en hulle tree uit die stroom Ministerie-werkers wat na die goue hekke stap. By 'n lesse-
naar aan die linkerkant onder 'n Sekuriteit-bordjie sit 'n ongeskeer-
de towenaar in 'n poublou mantel. Hy kyk op toe hulle nader kom
en sit sy *Daaglikse Profeet* neer.

"Ek begelei 'n besoeker," sê meneer Weasley en wys na Harry.

"Hierdie kant toe," sê die towenaar in 'n verveelde stem.

Harry stap nader en die towenaar lig 'n lang goue staaf, dun en
buigbaar soos 'n motorantenna, en beweeg dit op en neer aan Harry
se voor- en agterkant.

"Towerstaf," grom die towenaar, sit die goue toestel neer en hou
sy hand uit.

Harry haal sy towerstaf uit. Die towenaar sit dit op 'n vreemde
instrument wat soos 'n weegskaal met net een skottel lyk. Dit begin
vibreer. 'n Smal strook perkament verskyn by 'n gleuf in die basis.
Die towenaar skeur dit af en lees wat daarop staan.

"Agt-en-twintig sentimeter, feniksveerkern, vier jaar in gebruik.
Is dit korrek?"

"Ja," sê Harry senuagtig.

"Ek hou hierdie," sê die towenaar en steek die stukkie perkament
deur 'n koperpen. "Jy kry dit terug," voeg hy by en hou die tower-
staf na Harry uit.

"Dankie."

"Wag 'n bietjie . . ." sê die towenaar stadig.

Sy oë dwaal van die silwer balkie teen Harry se bors na sy voorkop.

"Dankie, Eric," sê meneer Weasley beslis. Hy vat Harry aan die
skouer, stuur hom weg van die lessenaar en terug in die stroom
towaars wat na die goue hekke loop.

Harry word effens deur die skare rondgestamp terwyl hy meneer
Weasley deur die hekke na 'n kleiner portaal aan die ander kant
volg, waar minstens twintig hysbakke agter goue traliehekke staan.
Hulle sluit by 'n groepie voor een van die hysbakke aan. 'n Groot
bebaarde towenaar wat naby hulle staan, hou 'n yslike kartondoos
vas waaruit krapgeluide kom.

“Gaan dit goed, Arthur?” sê die towenaar en knik vir meneer Weasley.

“Wat het jy daar, Bob?” vra meneer Weasley en kyk na die doos.

“Ons is nie seker nie,” sê die towenaar ernstig. “Ons het gedink dis ’n moerasaangepaste hoender tot dit begin vuur blaas het. Lyk vir my na ’n ernstige oortreding van die Verbod op Eksperimentele Telery.”

’n Hysbak sak met ’n gekletter en geklater tot voor hulle, die goue traliehekke skuif oop en Harry en meneer Weasley stap saam met die ander in. Harry word teen die agterkant vasgedruk. Verskeie hekse en towenaars kyk nuuskierig na hom. Hy staar na sy voete om nie iemand se oog te vang nie en druk terselfdertyd sy kuif plat.

Die tralies gaan met ’n slag toe en die hysbak beweeg stadig boontoe. Kettings ratel en dieselfde koel vrouestem wat Harry in die telefoonhokkie gehoor het, klink weer op.

“Vlak 7, Departement vir Magiese Sport en Ontspanning, insluitend die Hoofkwartier vir die Britse en Ierse Kwiddiekliga, die Ampelike Spoegklipklub en die Kantoor vir Stuitige Patente.”

Die hysbak se deure skuif oop. Harry sien ’n deurmekeer gang met verskeie plakkaat van Kwiddiekspanne wat skeef teen die mure geplak is. ’n Towenaar wat ’n arm vol besemstokke dra, sukkel moeisaam uit die hysbak en verdwyn in die gang. Die deure gaan toe, die hysbak sidder weer boontoe en die koel vrouestem kondig aan.

“Vlak 6, Departement vir Towervervoer, insluitend die Owerheid vir die Floo-netwerk, Besemregulasies, die Kantoor vir Poortsleutels en die Appareringtoetssentrum.”

Die hysbakdeure skuif weer oop en vier of vyf hekse en towenaars klim uit. Terselfdertyd swiep etlike papiervliegtuigies binne. Harry bekyk hulle terwyl hulle stadig bo sy kop draai. Hulle is ligpers van kleur en teen die kant van hul vlerke staan Ministerie vir Towerkuns gedruk.

“Interdepartementele memo’s,” prewel meneer Weasley. “Ons het eers uile gebruik, maar dit was ’n ongelooflike gemors, gedurig misoor die lessenaars.”

Hulle klater weer boontoe terwyl die memo’s om die lamp fladder wat van die hysbak se plafon hang.

“Vlak 5, Departement vir Internasionale Towersamewerking, insluitend die Liggaam vir Internasionale Towerhandelstandaarde, die Internasionale Kantoor vir Towerjustisie en die Internasionale Konfederasie van Towenaars, Britse Setels.”

Toe die deure oopgaan, zoem twee van die memo’s saam met ’n

paar towenaars en hekse uit, maar nog memo's vlieg in en dartel bo hul koppe rond sodat die lamplig flikker.

"Vlak 4, Departement vir die Regulering en Beheer van Magiese Kreature, insluitend die afdelings vir Ondiere, Wesens en Geeste, die Gnoomskakelkantoor en die Pesadviesburo."

"Ekskuus," sê die toenaar met die vuurblasende hoender en stap uit, gevolg deur 'n swerm memo's. Die deure klater weer toe.

"Vlak 3, Departement vir Towerongelukke en -katastrofes, insluitend die Taakmag vir die Regstelling van Toevallige Towy, die Uitwissingshoofkwartier en die Moggelwaardige Verskoningskomitee."

Almal stap op hierdie verdieping uit behalwe meneer Weasley, Harry en 'n heks wat 'n baie lang stuk perkament lees wat oor die vloer sleep. Die oorblywende memo's draai nog steeds om die lamp toe die hysbak weer sidderend boontoe gaan. Dan gaan die deure oop en die stem kondig aan.

"Vlak 2, Departement vir Towerwetstoepassing, insluitend die Kantoor vir die Misbruik van Towerkuns, Auror-hoofkwartiere en die Administrasiediens vir die Towaarsshoërhof."

"Dis ons, Harry," sê meneer Weasley en hulle volg die heks uit die hysbak na 'n gang met baie deure. "My kantoor is aan die ander kant van hierdie verdieping."

"Meneer Weasley," sê Harry toe hulle verby 'n venster stap waar deur sonlig stroom, "is ons dan nie meer onder die grond nie?"

"Ja, ons is," sê meneer Weasley. "Dis betowerde vensters. Toweronderhoud besluit elke dag watter soort weer ons gaan hê. Ons het twee maande lank net orkane gehad toe hulle die vorige keer salarisverhogings wou hê. . . . Daar om die draai, Harry."

Hulle gaan om 'n hoek, stap deur 'n paar swaar eikehoutdeure en bevind hulle in 'n wanordelike oop area wat in hokkies verdeel is en gons soos daar gelag en gepraat word. Memo's zoem soos miniatuurvuurpyle in en uit by die hokkies. 'n Skewe teken teen die naaste een sê: *Auror-hoofkwartier*.

Harry loer in die verbystap ongemerk by die hokkies in. Die Aurors se afskortings is beplak met alles van prente van vermiste towenaars tot foto's van hul gesinne, plakgate van hul gunstelingkwiddiekspele en artikels uit die *Daaglikse Profeet*. 'n Man in 'n skarlakenrooi kleed met 'n poniestert langer as Bill s'n, sit met sy stewels op sy lessenaar en dikteer 'n verslag vir sy veerpen. 'n Entjie verder praat 'n heks met 'n oogklap bo-oor haar afskorting met Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Môre, Weasley," sê Kingsley ongeërg toe hulle nader kom. "Ek moet 'n paar woordjies met jou wissel. Het jy tyd?"

“Ja, mits dit vinnig is,” sê meneer Weasley, “ek’s ’n bietjie haastig.”

Hulle praat asof hulle mekaar skaars ken en toe Harry sy mond oopmaak om vir Kingsley hallo te sê, trap meneer Weasley op sy voet. Hulle volg Kingsley in die gangetjie af na die heel laaste hokkie.

Hier kry Harry ’n ligte skok. Sirius se gesig knipoog van alle kante vir hom. Die mure is beplak met koerantknipsels en ou foto’s – selfs die een waar Sirius strooijonker by die Potters se troue is. Die enigste ruimte wat Siriusloos is, is ’n wêreldkaart waarop klein rooi pennetjies soos juwele gloei.

“Hier,” sê Kingsley kortaf vir meneer Weasley en druk ’n bondel perkament in sy hand. “Ek benodig soveel inligting moontlik oor vlieende Moggelvoertuie wat in die laaste twaalf maande gesien is. Volgens sekere bronne gebruik Swardt nog steeds sy ou motorfiets.”

Kingsley knipoog vir Harry en voeg in ’n fluisterstem by: “Gee die tydskrif vir hom, dit sal hom interesseer.” Dan sê hy in sy gewone stem: “En moenie daarmee draai nie, Weasley, die vertraging met die verslag oor vuurwafels het ons ondersoek met ’n maand vertraag.”

“As jy my verslag gelees het, sou jy geweet het die term is *vuurwapens*,” sê meneer Weasley koud. “En ek is bevrees jy sal moet wag vir die inligting oor motorfietse. Ons is op die oomblik baie besig.” Hy laat sak sy stem en sê: “As jy voor sewe kan wegkom, Molly maak frikkadelle.”

Meneer Weasley wink vir Harry en lei hom uit Kingsley se hokkie deur ’n tweede stel eikehoutdeure na ’n ander gang, draai links, stap deur nog ’n gang, draai regs in ’n dofverligte, nou gangetjie en kom uiteindelik by ’n doodloop waar ’n deur aan die linkerkant oopstaan. Dis ’n besemkas. Aan die regterkant is ’n gevlekte koperplaat waarop *Misbruik van Moggelartefakte* staan.

Meneer Weasley se mistroostige kantoor lyk amper kleiner as die besemkas. Twee lessenaars staan ingedruk en teen die mure staan soveel oorvol kabinette waarop stapels lêers skeef gepak is dat jy skaars om hulle kan skuifel. Die beperkte muurspasie spreek van meneer Weasley se obsessie: etlike plakkate van motors, insluitend een van ’n afgetakelde enjin, twee illustrasies van posbusse wat lyk of dit uit ’n Moggelkinderboek geknip is, en ’n diagram wat wys hoe om ’n kragprop te bedraad.

Bo-op meneer Weasley se oorvol inmandjie is ’n ou broodrooster wat mistroostig hik en ’n paar lêe leerhandskoene wat hul duime wikkels. ’n Foto van die Weasley-gesin staan langsaan. Dit lyk vir Harry asof Percy daaruit padgegee het.

“Ons het nie ’n venster nie,” sê meneer Weasley verskonend. Hy

trek sy vliegbaadjie uit en hang dit oor sy stoel se leuning. "Ons het daarvoor gevra, maar hulle dink skynbaar ons het dit nie nodig nie. Sit, Harry, dit lyk my Perkins is laat."

Harry skuif in die stoel agter Perkins se lessenaar in terwyl meneer Weasley deur die bondel perkament blaai wat Kingsley Shacklebolt vir hom gegee het.

"A," sê hy en grinnik toe hy 'n eksemplaar van die tydskrif *Die Vitter* uithaal, "ja..." Hy blaai vinnig daardeur. "Ja, hy's reg, ek is seker Sirius sal dit geniet – o liewe, wat's dit nou weer?"

'n Memo het so pas by die oop deur ingezoem en fladderend op die hikkende broodrooster geland. Meneer Weasley vou dit oop en lees dit hardop.

"Derde terugvloeiende openbare toilet gerapporteer in Bethnal Green, ondersoek asseblief onmiddellik. Dis besig om belaglik te raak..."

"'n Terugvloeiende toilet?"

"Antimoggel-poetsbakkers," sê meneer Weasley met 'n frons. "Ons het verlede week twee gehad, een in Wimbledon en een in Elephant and Castle. Die Moggels spoel die toilet en pleks dat alles verdwyn... wel, jy kan jou dit voorstel. Die arme goed laat kom die – ek dink hulle praat van *loodskieters* – jy weet, die mense wat pype en goed regmaak."

"Loodgieters?"

"Einste, ja, maar hulle is natuurlik dronkgeslaan. Ek hoop net ons kan die skuldiges vastrek."

"Sal dit Aurors wees wat hulle vang?"

"O nee, dis te nietig vir Aurors, dit sal die gewone patrollie wees – towerwetstoepassers. A, Harry, dis Perkins."

'n Krom, bedremmelde ou towenaar met donsige wit hare het pas hygend die kantoor binnegekom.

"O, Arthur!" sê hy radeloos sonder om eens na Harry te kyk. "Dank die vader, ek het nie geweet wat om te doen nie, of ek hier vir jou moet wag of nie. Ek het nou net 'n uil na jou huis gestuur, maar jy't dit seker gemis – 'n dringende boodskap het tien minute gelede gekom –"

"Ek weet klaar van die terugvloeiende toilet," sê meneer Weasley.

"Nee, nee, dis nie die toilet nie, dis die Potter-seun se verhoor – hulle het die tyd en plek verander – dit begin nou om agtuur onder in die ou Hofsaal 10 –"

"Onder in – maar hulle het vir my gesê – Merlin se baard!"

Meneer Weasley kyk na sy horlosie, gee 'n kreet en spring uit sy stoel.

“Gou, Harry, ons moes vyf minute gelede al daar gewees het!”

Perkins staan platgedruk teen die liasseerkabinette terwyl meneer Weasley by die deur uithardloop met Harry kort op sy hakke.

“Hoekom het hulle die tyd verander?” vra Harry uitasem terwyl hulle verby die Auror-hokkies hardloop en mense hul koppe uitsteek en na hulle staar. Hy voel asof al sy binnegoed by Perkins se lessenaar agtergebly het.

“Ek het nie ’n idee nie, maar dank die vader ons is so vroeg hier, anders het jy dit gemis en dit sou ’n katastrofe gewees het!”

Meneer Weasley kom gly-gly voor die hysbakke tot stilstand en druk die “af”-knoppie ’n paar keer ongeduldig.

“KomAAN!”

’n Hysbak verskyn klaterend en hulle storm haastig in. Elke keer dat dit stop, vloek meneer Weasley ergerlik en trommel op die nommer 9-knoppie.

“Daai hofsale is jare laas gebruik,” sê hy vies. “Ek kan nie dink hoekom hulle dit daar onder hou nie – tensy – maar nee –”

’n Mollige heks wat ’n rokende wynbeker dra, stap op daardie oomblik by die hysbak in en meneer Weasley bly stil.

“Die Atrium,” sê die koel vrouestem en die goue traliehekke gly oop. Harry sien die goue standbeelde en die fontein in die verte. Die mollige heks gaan uit en ’n bleek towenaar met ’n baie bedrukte gesig stap in.

“Môre, Arthur,” sê hy in ’n begrafnisstem toe die hysbak begin sak. “Sien jou nie dikwels hier onder nie.”

“Dringende sake, Bodus,” sê meneer Weasley, wat op die balle van sy voete wieg en kort-kort angstig na Harry kyk.

“A, ja,” sê Bodus en kyk na Harry sonder om sy oë te knip. “Natuurlik.”

Harry is te senuagtig om hom aan Bodus te steur, maar die starende blik laat hom nie beter voel nie.

“Departement van Geheime,” sê die koel vrouestem kortaf.

“Gou, Harry,” sê meneer Weasley toe die hysbak se deure ratelend oopgaan. Hulle nael af in ’n gang wat heeltemal anders as die boonstes lyk. Die mure is kaal, daar is geen vensters of deure nie, behalwe ’n lae swart deur aan die onderpunt van die gang. Harry verwag dat hulle daarheen sal gaan, maar pleks daarvan gryp meneer Weasley sy arm en sleep hom na links, waar ’n opening na ’n stel trappe lei.

“Hier af, hier af,” hyg meneer Weasley en neem twee trappe op ’n keer. “Die hysbak gaan nie tot heel onder nie. . . . hoekom hulle dit hier onder hou, weet nutter . . .”

Hulle kom aan die onderpunt van die trappe en hardloop deur nog 'n gang met ruwe klipmure en fakkels in klampe, baie soos die een wat na Snerp se ondergrondse kerker by Hogwarts gaan. Aan weerskante is swaar houtdeure met ysterskarniere en -sleutelgate.

"Hofsaal 10 . . . ek dink . . . ons is amper . . . ja."

Meneer Weasley stop voor 'n vuil donker deur met 'n enorme ysterslot. Hy val teen die muur en gryp na sy borskas.

"Opskud," hyg hy en wys met sy duim na die deur. "Gaan in!"

"Maar – moet ek alleen –?"

"Ja, ja, ek word nie toegelaat nie. Sterkte!"

Harry se hart klop 'n wilde taptoe teen sy adamsappel. Hy sluk swaar, draai die groot ysterhandvatsel en stap die hofsaal binne.

CHAPTER EIGHT



THE HEARING

Harry gasped; he could not help himself. The large dungeon he had entered was horribly familiar. He had not only seen it before, he had *been* here before. This was the place he had visited inside Dumbledore's Pensieve, the place where he had watched the Lestranges sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban.

The walls were made of dark stone, dimly lit by torches. Empty benches rose on either side of him, but ahead, in the highest benches of all, were many shadowy figures. They had been talking in low voices, but as the heavy door swung closed behind Harry an ominous silence fell.

A cold male voice rang across the courtroom.

"You're late."

“Sorry,” said Harry nervously. “I-I didn’t know the time had changed.”

“That is not the Wizengamot’s fault,” said the voice. “An owl was sent to you this morning. Take your seat.”

Harry dropped his gaze to the chair in the center of the room, the arms of which were covered in chains. He had seen those chains spring to life and bind whoever sat between them. His footsteps echoed loudly as he walked across the stone floor. When he sat gingerly on the edge of the chair the chains clinked rather threateningly but did not bind him. Feeling rather sick he looked up at the people seated at the bench above.

There were about fifty of them, all, as far as he could see, wearing plum-colored robes with an elaborately worked silver W on the left-hand side of the chest and all staring down their noses at him, some with very austere expressions, others looks of frank curiosity.

In the very middle of the front row sat Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic. Fudge was a portly man who often sported a lime-green bowler hat, though today he had dispensed with it; he had dispensed too with the indulgent smile he had once worn when he spoke to Harry. A broad, square-jawed witch with very short gray hair sat on Fudge’s left; she wore a monocle and looked forbidding. On Fudge’s right was another witch, but she was sitting so far back on the bench that her face was in shadow.

“Very well,” said Fudge. “The accused being present — finally — let us begin. Are you ready?” he called down the row.

“Yes, sir,” said an eager voice Harry knew. Ron’s brother Percy was sitting at the very end of the front bench. Harry looked at Percy,

expecting some sign of recognition from him, but none came. Percy's eyes, behind his horn-rimmed glasses, were fixed on his parchment, a quill poised in his hand.

"Disciplinary hearing of the twelfth of August," said Fudge in a ringing voice, and Percy began taking notes at once, "into offenses committed under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery and the International Statute of Secrecy by Harry James Potter, resident at number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey.

"Interrogators: Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister of Magic; Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, Court Scribe, Percy Ignatius Weasley —"

"— Witness for the defense, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore," said a quiet voice from behind Harry, who turned his head so fast he cricked his neck.

Dumbledore was striding serenely across the room wearing long midnight-blue robes and a perfectly calm expression. His long silver beard and hair gleamed in the torchlight as he drew level with Harry and looked up at Fudge through the half-moon spectacles that rested halfway down his very crooked nose.

The members of the Wizengamot were muttering. All eyes were now on Dumbledore. Some looked annoyed, others slightly frightened; two elderly witches in the back row, however, raised their hands and waved in welcome.

A powerful emotion had risen in Harry's chest at the sight of Dumbledore, a fortified, hopeful feeling rather like that which

phoenix song gave him. He wanted to catch Dumbledore's eye, but Dumbledore was not looking his way; he was continuing to look up at the obviously flustered Fudge.

"Ah," said Fudge, who looked thoroughly disconcerted. "Dumbledore. Yes. You — er — got our — er — message that the time and — er — place of the hearing had been changed, then?"

"I must have missed it," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "However, due to a lucky mistake I arrived at the Ministry three hours early, so no harm done."

"Yes — well — I suppose we'll need another chair — I — Weasley, could you — ?"

"Not to worry, not to worry," said Dumbledore pleasantly; he took out his wand, gave it a little flick, and a squashy chintz armchair appeared out of nowhere next to Harry. Dumbledore sat down, put the tips of his long fingers together, and looked at Fudge over them with an expression of polite interest. The Wizengamot was still muttering and fidgeting restlessly; only when Fudge spoke again did they settle down.

"Yes," said Fudge again, shuffling his notes. "Well, then. So. The charges. Yes."

He extricated a piece of parchment from the pile before him, took a deep breath, and read, "The charges against the accused are as follows: That he did knowingly, deliberately, and in full awareness of the illegality of his actions, having received a previous written warning from the Ministry of Magic on a similar charge, produce a Patronus Charm in a Muggle-inhabited area, in the presence of a Muggle, on August the second at twenty-three minutes past nine,

which constitutes an offense under paragraph C of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, and also under section thirteen of the International Confederation of Wizards' Statute of Secrecy.

"You are Harry James Potter, of number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey?" Fudge said, glaring at Harry over the top of his parchment.

"Yes," Harry said.

"You received an official warning from the Ministry for using illegal magic three years ago, did you not?"

"Yes, but —"

"And yet you conjured a Patronus on the night of the second of August?" said Fudge.

"Yes," said Harry, "but —"

"Knowing that you are not permitted to use magic outside school while you are under the age of seventeen?"

"Yes, but —"

"Knowing that you were in an area full of Muggles?"

"Yes, but —"

"Fully aware that you were in close proximity to a Muggle at the time?"

"Yes," said Harry angrily, "but I only used it because we were —"

The witch with the monocle on Fudge's left cut across him in a booming voice.

"You produced a fully fledged Patronus?"

"Yes," said Harry, "because —"

“A corporeal Patronus?”

“A — what?” said Harry.

“Your Patronus had a clearly defined form? I mean to say, it was more than vapor or smoke?”

“Yes,” said Harry, feeling both impatient and slightly desperate, “it’s a stag, it’s always a stag.”

“Always?” boomed Madam Bones. “You have produced a Patronus before now?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “I’ve been doing it for over a year —”

“And you are fifteen years old?”

“Yes, and —”

“You learned this at school?”

“Yes, Professor Lupin taught me in my third year, because of the —”

“Impressive,” said Madam Bones, staring down at him, “a true Patronus at that age . . . very impressive indeed.”

Some of the wizards and witches around her were muttering again; a few nodded, but others were frowning and shaking their heads.

“It’s not a question of how impressive the magic was,” said Fudge in a testy voice. “In fact, the more impressive the worse it is, I would have thought, given that the boy did it in plain view of a Muggle!”

Those who had been frowning now murmured in agreement, but it was the sight of Percy’s sanctimonious little nod that goaded Harry into speech.

“I did it because of the dementors!” he said loudly, before anyone could interrupt him again.

He had expected more muttering, but the silence that fell seemed to be somehow denser than before.

“Dementors?” said Madam Bones after a moment, raising her thick eyebrows so that her monocle looked in danger of falling out. “What do you mean, boy?”

“I mean there were two dementors down that alleyway and they went for me and my cousin!”

“Ah,” said Fudge again, smirking unpleasantly as he looked around at the Wizengamot, as though inviting them to share the joke. “Yes. Yes, I thought we’d be hearing something like this.”

“Dementors in Little Whinging?” Madam Bones said in tones of great surprise. “I don’t understand —”

“Don’t you, Amelia?” said Fudge, still smirking. “Let me explain. He’s been thinking it through and decided dementors would make a very nice little cover story, very nice indeed. Muggles can’t see dementors, can they, boy? Highly convenient, highly convenient, so it’s just your word and no witnesses . . .”

“I’m not lying!” said Harry loudly, over another outbreak of muttering from the court. “There were two of them, coming from opposite ends of the alley, everything went dark and cold and my cousin felt them and ran for it —”

“Enough, enough!” said Fudge with a very supercilious look on his face. “I’m sorry to interrupt what I’m sure would have been a very well-rehearsed story —”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. The Wizengamot fell silent again.

“We do, in fact, have a witness to the presence of dementors in that alleyway,” he said, “other than Dudley Dursley, I mean.”

Fudge's plump face seemed to slacken, as though somebody had let air out of it. He stared down at Dumbledore for a moment or two, then, with the appearance of a man pulling himself back together, said, "We haven't got time to listen to more taradiddles, I'm afraid, Dumbledore. I want this dealt with quickly —"

"I may be wrong," said Dumbledore pleasantly, "but I am sure that under the Wizengamot Charter of Rights, the accused has the right to present witnesses for his or her case? Isn't that the policy of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Madam Bones?" he continued, addressing the witch in the monocle.

"True," said Madam Bones. "Perfectly true."

"Oh, very well, very well," snapped Fudge. "Where is this person?"

"I brought her with me," said Dumbledore. "She's just outside the door. Should I — ?"

"No — Weasley, you go," Fudge barked at Percy, who got up at once, hurried down the stone steps from the judge's balcony, and hastened past Dumbledore and Harry without glancing at them.

A moment later, Percy returned, followed by Mrs. Figg. She looked scared and more batty than ever. Harry wished she had thought to change out of her carpet slippers.

Dumbledore stood up and gave Mrs. Figg his chair, conjuring a second one for himself.

"Full name?" said Fudge loudly, when Mrs. Figg had perched herself nervously on the very edge of her seat.

"Arabella Doreen Figg," said Mrs. Figg in her quavery voice.

"And who exactly are you?" said Fudge, in a bored and lofty

voice.

"I'm a resident of Little Whinging, close to where Harry Potter lives," said Mrs. Figg.

"We have no record of any witch or wizard living in Little Whinging other than Harry Potter," said Madam Bones at once. "That situation has always been closely monitored, given . . . given past events."

"I'm a Squib," said Mrs. Figg. "So you wouldn't have me registered, would you?"

"A Squib, eh?" said Fudge, eyeing her suspiciously. "We'll be checking that. You'll leave details of your parentage with my assistant, Weasley. Incidentally, can Squibs see dementors?" he added, looking left and right along the bench where he sat.

"Yes, we can!" said Mrs. Figg indignantly.

Fudge looked back down at her, his eyebrows raised. "Very well," he said coolly. "What is your story?"

"I had gone out to buy cat food from the corner shop at the end of Wisteria Walk, shortly after nine on the evening of the second of August," gabbled Mrs. Figg at once, as though she had learned what she was saying by heart, "when I heard a disturbance down the alleyway between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk. On approaching the mouth of the alleyway I saw dementors running —"

"Running?" said Madam Bones sharply. "Dementors don't run, they glide."

"That's what I meant to say," said Mrs. Figg quickly, patches of pink appearing in her withered cheeks. "Gliding along the alley toward what looked like two boys."

“What did they look like?” said Madam Bones, narrowing her eyes so that the monocle’s edges disappeared into her flesh.

“Well, one was very large and the other one rather skinny —”

“No, no,” said Madam Bones impatiently, “the dementors describe them.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Figg, the pink flush creeping up her neck now. “They were big. Big and wearing cloaks.”

Harry felt a horrible sinking in the pit of his stomach. Whatever Mrs. Figg said to the contrary, it sounded to him as though the most she had ever seen was a picture of a dementor, and a picture could never convey the truth of what these beings were like: the eerie way they moved, hovering inches over the ground, or the rotting smell of them, or that terrible, rattling noise they made as they sucked on the surrounding air . . . A dumpy wizard with a large black mustache in the second row leaned close to his neighbor, a frizzy-haired witch, and whispered something in her ear. She smirked and nodded.

“Big and wearing cloaks,” repeated Madam Bones coolly, while Fudge snorted derisively. “I see. Anything else?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Figg. “I felt them. Everything went cold, and this was a very warm summer’s night, mark you. And I felt . . . as though all happiness had gone from the world . . . and I remembered . . . dreadful things . . .”

Her voice shook and died.

Madam Bones’ eyes widened slightly. Harry could see red marks under her eyebrow where the monocle had dug into it.

“What did the dementors do?” she asked, and Harry felt a rush of hope.

“They went for the boys,” said Mrs. Figg, her voice stronger and more confident now, the pink flush ebbing away from her face. “One of them had fallen. The other was backing away, trying to repel the dementor. That was Harry. He tried twice and produced silver vapor. On the third attempt, he produced a Patronus, which charged down the first dementor and then, with his encouragement, chased away the second from his cousin. And that . . . that was what happened,” Mrs. Figg finished, somewhat lamely.

Madam Bones looked down at Mrs. Figg in silence; Fudge was not looking at her at all, but fidgeting with his papers. Finally he raised his eyes and said, rather aggressively, “That’s what you saw, is it?”

“That was what happened,” Mrs. Figg repeated.

“Very well,” said Fudge. “You may go.”

Mrs. Figg cast a frightened look from Fudge to Dumbledore, then got up and shuffled off toward the door again. Harry heard it thud shut behind her.

“Not a very convincing witness,” said Fudge loftily.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Madam Bones in her booming voice. “She certainly described the effects of a dementor attack very accurately. And I can’t imagine why she would say they were there if they weren’t —”

“But dementors wandering into a Muggle suburb and just *happening* to come across a wizard?” snorted Fudge. “The odds on that must be very, very long, even Bagman wouldn’t have bet —”

“Oh, I don’t think any of us believe the dementors were there by coincidence,” said Dumbledore lightly.

The witch sitting to the right of Fudge with her face in shadow

moved slightly, but everyone else was quite still and silent.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” asked Fudge icily.

“It means that I think they were ordered there,” said Dumbledore.

“I think we might have a record of it if someone had ordered a pair of dementors to go strolling through Little Whinging!” barked Fudge.

“Not if the dementors are taking orders from someone other than the Ministry of Magic these days,” said Dumbledore calmly. “I have already given you my views on this matter, Cornelius.”

“Yes, you have,” said Fudge forcefully, “and I have no reason to believe that your views are anything other than bilge, Dumbledore. The dementors remain in place in Azkaban and are doing everything we ask them to.”

“Then,” said Dumbledore, quietly but clearly, “we must ask ourselves why somebody within the Ministry ordered a pair of dementors into that alleyway on the second of August.”

In the complete silence that greeted these words, the witch to the right of Fudge leaned forward so that Harry saw her for the first time.

He thought she looked just like a large, pale toad. She was rather squat with a broad, flabby face, as little neck as Uncle Vernon, and a very wide, slack mouth. Her eyes were large, round, and slightly bulging. Even the little black velvet bow perched on top of her short curly hair put him in mind of a large fly she was about to catch on a long sticky tongue.

“The Chair recognizes Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister,” said Fudge.

The witch spoke in a fluttery, girlish, high-pitched voice that took Harry aback; he had been expecting a croak.

"I'm sure I must have misunderstood you, Professor Dumbledore," she said with a simper that left her big, round eyes as cold as ever. "So silly of me. But it sounded for a teensy moment as though you were suggesting that the Ministry of Magic had ordered an attack on this boy!"

She gave a silvery laugh that made the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stand up. A few other members of the Wizengamot laughed with her. It could not have been plainer that not one of them was really amused.

"If it is true that the dementors are taking orders only from the Ministry of Magic, and it is also true that two dementors attacked Harry and his cousin a week ago, then it follows logically that somebody at the Ministry might have ordered the attacks," said Dumbledore politely. "Of course, these particular dementors may have been outside Ministry control —"

"There are no dementors outside Ministry control!" snapped Fudge, who had turned brick red.

Dumbledore inclined his head in a little bow.

"Then undoubtedly the Ministry will be making a full inquiry into why two dementors were so very far from Azkaban and why they attacked without authorization."

"It is not for you to decide what the Ministry of Magic does or does not do, Dumbledore!" snapped Fudge, now a shade of magenta of which Uncle Vernon would have been proud.

"Of course it isn't," said Dumbledore mildly. "I was merely expressing my confidence that this matter will not go uninvestigated."

He glanced at Madam Bones, who readjusted her monocle and

stared back at him, frowning slightly.

"I would remind everybody that the behavior of these dementors, if indeed they are not figments of this boy's imagination, is not the subject of this hearing!" said Fudge. "We are here to examine Harry Potter's offenses under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery!"

"Of course we are," said Dumbledore, "but the presence of dementors in that alleyway is highly relevant. Clause seven of the Decree states that magic may be used before Muggles in exceptional circumstances, and as those exceptional circumstances include situations that threaten the life of the wizard or witch himself, or witches, wizards, or Muggles present at the time of the —"

"We are familiar with clause seven, thank you very much!" snarled Fudge.

"Of course you are," said Dumbledore courteously. "Then we are in agreement that Harry's use of the Patronus Charm in these circumstances falls precisely into the category of exceptional circumstances it describes?"

"If there were dementors, which I doubt —"

"You have heard from an eyewitness," Dumbledore interrupted. "If you still doubt her truthfulness, call her back, question her again. I am sure she would not object."

"I — that — not —" blustered Fudge, fiddling with the papers before him. "It's — I want this over with today, Dumbledore!"

"But naturally, you would not care how many times you heard from a witness, if the alternative was a serious miscarriage of justice," said Dumbledore.

“Serious miscarriage, my hat!” said Fudge at the top of his voice. “Have you ever bothered to tot up the number of cock-and-bull stories this boy has come out with, Dumbledore, while trying to cover up his flagrant misuse of magic out of school? I suppose you’ve forgotten the Hover Charm he used three years ago —”

“That wasn’t me, it was a house-elf!” said Harry.

“YOU SEE?” roared Fudge, gesturing flamboyantly in Harry’s direction. “A house-elf! In a Muggle house! I ask you —”

“The house-elf in question is currently in the employ of Hogwarts School,” said Dumbledore. “I can summon him here in an instant to give evidence if you wish.”

“I — not — I haven’t got time to listen to house-elves! Anyway, that’s not the only — he blew up his aunt, for God’s sake!” Fudge shouted, banging his fist on the judge’s bench and upsetting a bottle of ink.

“And you very kindly did not press charges on that occasion, accepting, I presume, that even the best wizards cannot always control their emotions,” said Dumbledore calmly, as Fudge attempted to scrub the ink off his notes.

“And I haven’t even started on what he gets up to at school —”

“— but as the Ministry has no authority to punish Hogwarts students for misdemeanors at school, Harry’s behavior there is not relevant to this inquiry,” said Dumbledore, politely as ever, but now with a suggestion of coolness behind his words.

“Oho!” said Fudge. “Not our business what he does at school, eh? You think so?”

“The Ministry does not have the power to expel Hogwarts

students, Cornelius, as I reminded you on the night of the second of August,” said Dumbledore. “Nor does it have the right to confiscate wands until charges have been successfully proven, again, as I reminded you on the night of the second of August. In your admirable haste to ensure that the law is upheld, you appear, inadvertently I am sure, to have overlooked a few laws yourself.”

“Laws can be changed,” said Fudge savagely.

“Of course they can,” said Dumbledore, inclining his head. “And you certainly seem to be making many changes, Cornelius. Why, in the few short weeks since I was asked to leave the Wizengamot, it has already become the practice to hold a full criminal trial to deal with a simple matter of underage magic!”

A few of the wizards above them shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Fudge turned a slightly deeper shade of puce. The toadlike witch on his right, however, merely gazed at Dumbledore, her face quite expressionless.

“As far as I am aware, however,” Dumbledore continued, “there is no law yet in place that says this court’s job is to punish Harry for every bit of magic he has ever performed. He has been charged with a specific offense and he has presented his defense. All he and I can do now is to await your verdict.”

Dumbledore put his fingertips together again and said no more. Fudge glared at him, evidently incensed. Harry glanced sideways at Dumbledore, seeking reassurance; he was not at all sure that Dumbledore was right in telling the Wizengamot, in effect, that it was about time they made a decision. Again, however, Dumbledore seemed oblivious to Harry’s attempt to catch his eye. He continued to

look up at the benches where the entire Wizengamot had fallen into urgent, whispered conversations.

Harry looked at his feet. His heart, which seemed to have swollen to an unnatural size, was thumping loudly under his ribs. He had expected the hearing to last longer than this. He was not at all sure that he had made a good impression. He had not really said very much. He ought to have explained more fully about the dementors, about how he had fallen over, about how both he and Dudley had nearly been kissed. . . .

Twice he looked up at Fudge and opened his mouth to speak, but his swollen heart was now constricting his air passages and both times he merely took a deep breath and looked back at his shoes.

Then the whispering stopped. Harry wanted to look up at the judges, but found that it was really much, much easier to keep examining his laces.

“Those in favor of clearing the accused of all charges?” said Madam Bones’s booming voice.

Harry’s head jerked upward. There were hands in the air, many of them . . . more than half! Breathing very fast, he tried to count, but before he could finish Madam Bones had said, “And those in favor of conviction?”

Fudge raised his hand; so did half a dozen others, including the witch on his right and the heavily mustached wizard and the frizzy-haired witch in the second row.

Fudge glanced around at them all, looking as though there was something large stuck in his throat, then lowered his own hand. He took two deep breaths and then said, in a voice distorted by

suppressed rage, "Very well, very well . . . cleared of all charges."

"Excellent," said Dumbledore briskly, springing to his feet, pulling out his wand, and causing the two chintz armchairs to vanish. "Well, I must be getting along. Good day to you all."

And without looking once at Harry, he swept from the dungeon.

Die verhoor

Harry snak na asem voor hy homself kan keer. Die groot kerker waarin hy hom bevind, is aaklig bekend. Hy het dit nie net al voorheen gesien nie, hy was al hier. Dis die plek wat hy in Dompeldorius se Peinssif besoek het, die plek waar hy gesien het hoe die Lestranges tot lewenslange gevangenisstraf in Azkaban gevonniss word.

Die mure is van donker klip, dof verlig deur fakkels. Leë banke verrys aan weerskante van hom, maar in die hoogste banke in die middel is baie skaduagtige figure. Hulle praat in gedempte stemme, maar toe die swaar deur agter Harry toeswaai, daal 'n onheilspellende stilte.

'n Koue manstem daver deur die hofsaal.

"Jy is laat."

"Jammer," sê Harry senuagtig. "Ek — ek het nie geweet die tyd het verander nie."

"Dit is nie die Towenaarshoërhof se skuld nie," sê die stem. "'n Uil is vanoggend na jou gestuur. Gaan sit."

Harry kyk af na die stoel voor in die middel van die vertrek. Daar is kettings op die armleunings. Hy het ook gesien hoe daardie kettings skielik opspring en die persoon wat tussen hulle sit, vasmaak. Sy voetstappe weergalm toe hy oor die klipvloer stap. Hy gaan sit behoedsaam op die punt van die stoel en die kettings kletter dreigend, maar bind hom nie vas nie. Hy voel effens naar toe hy opkyk na die mense in die banke bo hom.

Dit lyk of daar omtrent vyftig van hulle is. Almal dra pruimkleurige mantels met 'n opgesmukte geborduurde silwer "T" links bo op die borskas, en almal staar uit die hoogte na hom, sommige met baie stroewe uitdrukings, ander lyk bloot nuuskierig.

In die middel van die voorste ry sit Cornelius Broddelwerk, die Minister vir Towerkuns. Broddelwerk is 'n gesette man wat dikwels 'n lemmetjiegroen hardebolkeil dra, hoewel nie vandag nie. Die verdraagsame glimlag waarmee hy vroeër altyd met Harry gepraat het, is ook nie vandag daar nie. Aan Broddelwerk se linkerkant sit 'n

breedgeskouerde heks met 'n vierkantige kakebeen en baie kort grys hare. Sy dra 'n oogglas en lyk onverbiddelik. Aan Broddelwerk se regterkant sit nog 'n heks, maar sy leun so ver terug op die bank dat haar gesig in die skaduwee is.

“Goed,” sê Broddelwerk. “Die beskuldigde is teenwoordig – uiteindelik – ons kan begin. Is jy gereed?” roep hy met die ry af.

“Ja, meneer,” sê 'n gretige stem wat Harry dadelik herken. Ron se broer Percy sit heel aan die punt van die voorste bank. Harry kyk na Percy met die verwagting dat hy die een of ander teken sal gee dat hulle mekaar ken, maar daars niks. Percy se oë agter sy bril is vasgenaël op die perkament voor hom en sy veeperpen is gereed in sy hand.

“Disziplinêre verhoor op die twaalfde Augustus,” sê Broddelwerk in 'n welluidende stem en Percy begin dadelik notas maak, “ná oortredings begaan onder die Statuut vir die Redelike Beperking op Minderjarige Toordery en die Internasionale Statuut van Geheimhouding deur Harry James Potter, inwoner van Ligusterlaan 4, Little Whinging, Surrey.

“Ondervraers: Cornelius Oswald Broddelwerk, Minister van Towerkuns; Amelia Susan Bones, Hoof van die Departement van Magiese Wetstoepassing; Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior ondersekretaresse van die Minister. Hofskriba: Percy Ignatius Weasley –”

“Getuie vir die verdediging: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dompeldorius,” sê 'n bedaarde stem agter Harry, wat sy kop só vinnig draai dat hy 'n kramp in sy nek kry.

Dompeldorius stap langsaam deur die vertrek in sy lang midder-nagblou kleed en met 'n volkome kalm uitdrukking op sy gesig. Sy lang silwer baard en hare glinster in die fakkellig toe hy oorkant Harry gaan staan en deur sy halfmaanbril wat in die middel van sy krom neus sit na Broddelwerk opkyk.

Die lede van die Hoërhof mompel onderlangs. Alle oë is vasgenaël op Dompeldorius. Party lyk ergerlik, ander effens verskrik. Twee bejaarde hekse in die agterste ry lig egter hul hande en wuif 'n vriendelike welkom.

'n Kragtige emosie wel in Harry op toe hy vir Dompeldorius sien. 'n Gevoel van krag en hoop, baie soos die feniks se lied hom destyds gegee het. Hy probeer Dompeldorius se oog vang, maar Dompeldorius kyk nie na hom nie; hy kyk nog steeds na die duidelik ont-hutste Broddelwerk.

“A,” sê Broddelwerk, wat lyk of hy heeltemal onkant betrap is. “Dompeldorius. Ja. Jy – hm – dan het jy ons – hm – boodskap gekry dat die tyd en – hm – plek van die verhoor verander is?”

"Ek moes dit misgeloop het," sê Dompeldorius vrolik. "Maar gelukkig het ek toevallig drie uur te vroeg by die Ministerie opgedaag. Dus is geen skade gedoen nie."

"Ja – wel – ek skat ons het nog 'n stoel nodig – ek – Weasley – wil jy –?"

"Moenie moeite doen nie, regtig," sê Dompeldorius plesierig. Hy haal sy towerstaf uit, swaai dit, en 'n groot sagte leunstoel van glans-lys verskyn uit die niet langs Harry. Dompeldorius gaan sit, plaas die punte van sy lang vingers teen mekaar en kyk na Broddelwerk met 'n uitdrukking van beleefde belangstelling. Die Towenaarshoërhof brom en vroetel nog steeds rusteloos. Dis eers toe Broddelwerk weer praat dat hulle stil word.

"Ja," sê Broddelwerk en skuif sy notas rond. "Wel. Goed. Die aanklagte. Ja."

Hy haal 'n stuk perkament uit die stapel voor hom, trek sy asem diep in en lees: "Die aanklagte teen die beskuldigde is soos volg:

"Dat hy wetend, met opset en ten volle bewus van die onwettigheid van sy aksies, op die tweede Augustus om drie-en-twintig minute oor nege, nadat hy reeds vantevore 'n geskrewe waarskuwing van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns op 'n soortgelyke aanklag ontvang het, 'n Patronus-towerspreuk in 'n Moggelbewoonde gebied in die teenwoordigheid van 'n Moggel uitgespreek het, wat 'n oortreding is onder paragraaf C van die Verordening vir die Redelike Beperking op Minderjarige Toordery, 1875, en ook onder Seksie 13 van die Statuut van Geheimhouding van die Internasionale Konfederasie van Towenaars.

"Jy is Harry James Potter van Ligusterlaan 4, Little Whinging, Surrey?" sê Broddelwerk en gluur oor die perkament na Harry.

"Ja," sê Harry.

"Jy het drie jaar gelede 'n amptelike waarskuwing van die Ministerie ontvang vir die gebruik van onwettige toordery, is dit reg?"

"Ja, maar –"

"En het jy 'n Patronus op die nag van die tweede Augustus opgetower?" sê Broddelwerk.

"Ja," sê Harry, "maar –"

"Wetend dat jy nie toegelaat word om buite die skool te toor terwyl jy onder die ouderdom van sewentien jaar is nie?"

"Ja, maar –"

"Wetend dat jy in 'n gebied vol Moggels is?"

"Ja, maar –"

"En ten volle daarvan bewus dat jy op daardie oomblik in die teenwoordigheid van 'n Moggel was?"

"Ja," sê Harry vererg, "maar ek het dit net gedoen omdat ons –"
Die heks met die oogglas val hom daverend in die rede.

"Jy het 'n volledige Patronus geproduseer?"

"Ja," sê Harry, "want –"

"'n Materiële Patronus?"

"'n – Wat?" sê Harry.

"Jou Patronus het 'n duidelik gedefinieerde vorm gehad? Ek bedoel, dit was meer as 'n mis- of rookwolk?"

"Ja," sê Harry, wat ongeduldig sowel as 'n bietjie radeloos voel, "dis 'n takbok, dis altyd 'n takbok."

"Altyd?" bulder Madame Bones. "Het jy al tevore 'n Patronus getoor?"

"Ja," sê Harry. "Ek kan dit al 'n jaar lank doen."

"En jy is vyftien jaar oud?"

"Ja, en –"

"Jy het dit by die skool geleer?"

"Ja, professor Lupin het dit vir my in my derde jaar geleer, omdat die –"

"Indrukwekkend," sê Madame Bones en staar af na hom. "'n Egte Patronus op hierdie ouderdom – baie indrukwekkend."

Sommige van die ander towenaars en hekse brom weer, 'n paar knik, maar die ander frons en skud hul koppe.

"Die vraag is nie hoe indrukwekkend die toordery was nie," sê Broddelwerk vererg. "Om die waarheid te sê, hoe meer indrukwekkend, hoe erger, in die lig van die feit dat die seun dit in die teenwoordigheid van 'n Moggel gedoen het!"

Diegene wat gefronst het, brom nou instemmend, maar dis toe Harry sien hoe Percy sy kop vroom knik dat hy besluit om nie langer stil te bly nie.

"Ek het dit gedoen omdat daar Dementors was!" sê hy hard voor iemand hom weer in die rede kan val.

Hy het gereken hulle gaan weer brom, maar die stilte wat neerdaal, is swaarder as tevore.

"Dementors?" sê Madame Bones ná 'n rukkjie. Haar digte wenkbroue lig tot dit lyk of haar oogglas gaan uitval. "Wat bedoel jy, seun?"

"Ek bedoel daar was twee Dementors in daardie laning en hulle het my en my neef aangeval!"

"A," sê Broddelwerk en grynslag onplesierig terwyl hy na die Towenaarshoërhof kyk asof hy hulle nooi om die grap met hom te deel. "Ja, ja, ek het gedink ons sal na so iets moet luister."

"Dementors in Little Whinging?" sê Madame Bones in 'n verbaasde stem. "Ek verstaan nie –"

"Jy verstaan nie, Amelia?" sê Broddelwerk nog steeds grynsend. "Laat ek verduidelik. Hy moes 'n verskoning uitdink en het besluit Dementors sal 'n baie oulike rookskerm wees, inderdaad baie oulik. Moggels kan nie Dementors sien nie, kan hulle, boet? Baie gerieflik, baie gerieflik. Dis dus jou woord en geen ooggetuies nie."

"Ek lieg nie!" sê Harry hard bo-oor 'n opwelling van fluisterstemme. "Daar was twee van hulle in die laan en hulle het van weerskante gekom en alles het donker en koud geword en my neef het hulle gevoel en weggehardloop –"

"Genoeg! Genoeg!" sê Broddelwerk met 'n neerbuigende uitdrukking op sy gesig. "Ek is jammer om iets te onderbreek wat duidelik 'n goed voorbereide storie is –"

Dompeldorius maak sy keel skoon. Die Towenaarshoërhof raak stil.

"Ons het, om die waarheid te sê, 'n getuie vir die teenwoordigheid van twee Dementors in daardie laan," sê hy, "anders as Dudley Dursley, natuurlik."

Broddelwerk se ronde gesig verslap asof iemand dit afgeblaas het. Hy staan 'n paar oomblikke na Dompeldorius voor hy hom regruk en sê: "Ek's bevrees ons het nie tyd om na nog onsin te luister nie, Dompeldorius. Ek wil dit spoedig afhandel –"

"Ek mag verkeerd wees," sê Dompeldorius vriendelik, "maar ek is seker dat die beskuldigde, kragtens die grondwet van die Towenaarshoërhof, die reg het om getuies vir haar of sy saak te roep? Dit is mos die beleid van die Departement vir Towerwetstoepassing, korrek, Madame Bones?" wend hy hom tot die heks met die oogglas.

"Dit is so," sê Madame Bones. "Dit is heeltemal korrek."

"O, goed, goed," snou Broddelwerk. "Waar is hierdie persoon?"

"Ek het haar saam met my gebring," sê Dompeldorius. "Sy's buite voor die deur. Sal ek –"

"Nee. Weasley, gaan jy," blaf Broddelwerk vir Percy, wat dadelik opvlieg en van die regters se balkon met die kliptrappe af draf, voor Dompeldorius en Harry verby sonder om eens na hulle te kyk.

'n Oomblik later kom Percy terug, gevolg deur tant Freya. Sy lyk meer verskrik en getik as ooit. Harry wens sy het daaraan gedink om haar tapytpantoffels uit te trek.

Dompeldorius staan op, bied sy stoel vir tant Freya aan en toor vir homself nog een.

"Volle name?" sê Broddelwerk hard nadat tant Freya senuagtig op die punt van haar stoel gaan sit het.

"Freya Arabella Figg," sê tant Freya in haar bewerige stem.

"En wie is jy eintlik, dame?" sê Broddelwerk uit die hoogte en in 'n verveelde stem.

“Ek is ’n inwoner van Little Whinging. Ek woon naby Harry Potter,” sê tant Freya.

“Ons het geen rekord van enige heks of towenaar in Little Whinging behalwe Harry Potter nie,” sê Madame Bones dadelik. “Die situasie word nog altyd fyn dopgehou, in die lig van . . . in die lig van gebeure in die verlede.”

“Ek’s ’n Sisser,” sê tant Freya. “Julle sal my dus nie op jul rekords hê nie.”

“’n Sisser, hê?” sê Broddelwerk en kyk stip na haar. “Ons sal seker maak daarvan. Laat die besonderhede van jou ouers by my assistent Weasley. Terloops, kan Sissers Dementors sien?” voeg hy by terwyl hy na links en regs op die balkon kyk.

“Ja, ons kan!” sê tant Freya verontwaardig.

Broddelwerk kyk met geligte wenkbroue af na haar. “Goed dan,” sê hy kil. “Wat is jou storie?”

“Ek het om nege-uur die aand van die tweede Augustus uitgegaan om katkos by die winkel op die hoek aan die onderpunt van Wisteriastraat te gaan koop,” sê tant Freya dadelik, asof sy dit uit haar kop geleer het, “toe ek ’n oproerigheid in die laan tussen Magnoliasingel en Wisteriastraat hoor. Ek het na die onderpunt van die laan gegaan en Dementors sien hardloop –”

“Hardloop?” sê Madame Bones skerp. “Dementors hardloop nie, hulle sweef.”

“Dis wat ek bedoel,” sê tant Freya vinnig en twee pienk kolle verskyn op haar geplooië wange. “Hulle het deur die laan gesweef na wat soos twee seuns gelyk het . . .”

“Hoe het hulle gelyk?” vra Madame Bones en trek haar oë op skrefies sodat die rand van haar oogglas in haar wang verdwyn.

“Wel, die een was baie groot en die ander een maer –”

“Nee, nee,” sê Madame Bones ongeduldig. “Die Dementors beskryf hulle.”

“O,” sê tant Freya en die pienk blos versprei na haar nek. “Hulle was groot. Groot en met mantels.”

Harry voel ’n aaklige, sinkende sensasie op die krop van sy maag. Soos tant Freya dit stel, klink dit of sy nog net ’n prent van ’n Dementor gesien het, en geen prent kan reg laat geskied aan hierdie wesens nie: die grillerige manier waarop hulle ’n entjie bo die grond sweef; hul verrottende reuk; die vreesaanjaende, ratelende geroggel soos hulle die lug om hulle insuig . . .

’n Kort, dik towenaar met ’n groot swart snor in die tweede ry leun oor en fluister iets in sy buurvrou se oor, ’n heks met kroes hare. Sy grynslag en knik.

“Groot en met mantels,” herhaal Madame Bones kil, terwyl Broddelwerk minagterend snork. “Ek sien. Nog iets?”

“Ja,” sê tant Freya. “Ek het hulle gevoel. Alles het koud geword en dit was ’n baie warm somersaand, ek verseker u. En dit het vir my gevoel . . . asof alle geluk uit die wêreld verdwyn het . . . en ek het onthou . . . vreeslike dinge . . .”

Haar stem bewe en sterf weg.

Madame Bones se oë rek effens. Harry sien die rooi merk wat die oogglas onder haar wenkbrou gemaak het.

“Wat het die Dementors gedoen?” vra sy en skielik kry Harry hoop.

“Hulle het op die seuns afgepyl,” sê tant Freya, haar stem nou sterker en meer selfversekerd, en die pienk blos vloei uit haar wange. “Een van die seuns het geval. Die ander een het getreier en die Dementor probeer afweer. Dit was Harry. Hy’t twee keer probeer, maar daar was net ’n silwer damp. Met die derde probeerslag het sy Patronus die eerste Dementor bestorm en verjaag, en toe, met sy aanmoediging, die tweede een van sy neef af verjaag. En dis . . . dis wat gebeur het,” eindig sy floutjies.

Madame Bones kyk in stilte af na haar. Broddelwerk kyk nie na haar nie, maar vroetel met sy papiere. Uiteindelik kyk hy op en sê taamlik aggressief: “Dis wat jy gesien het, hè?”

“Dis wat gebeur het,” herhaal tant Freya.

“Goed dan,” sê Broddelwerk. “Jy kan gaan.”

Tant Freya kyk verskrik van Broddelwerk na Dompeldorius voor sy opstaan en na die deur skuifel. Harry hoor hoe dit agter haar toeklap.

“Nie ’n baie oortuigende getuie nie,” sê Broddelwerk uit die hoogte.

“O, ek weet nie,” sê Madame Bones in haar dawerende stem. “Sy het die uitwerking van ’n Dementor-aanval baie akkuraat beskryf. En ek kan my nie voorstel hoekom sy sal sê hulle was daar as dit nie so is nie.”

“Maar Dementors wat in ’n Moggelvoorstad rondswaai en toeval-
lig op ’n towenaar afkom?” snork Broddelwerk. “Die kanse moet bitter skraal wees. Selfs Bagman sal nie wed dat –”

“O, ek dink nie een van ons reken dat die Dementors toevallig daar was nie,” sê Dompeldorius sag.

Die heks wat aan Broddelwerk se regterkant met haar gesig in die skadu sit, roer effens, maar die res is bewegingloos en tjoepstil.

“En wat is dit veronderstel om te beteken?” vra Broddelwerk ysig.

“Dit beteken ek dink hulle is beveel om daarheen te gaan,” sê Dompeldorius.

“Ek sou reken ons sal dit op rekord hê as iemand ’n paar Dementors opdrag gegee het om in Little Whinging te gaan rond-sweef!” blaf Broddelwerk.

“Nie as die Dementors se bevele deesdae van iemand anders as die Ministerie vir Towerkuns kom nie,” sê Dompeldorius bedaard. “Ek het reeds vir jou gesê hoe ek die saak sien, Cornelius.”

“Ja, jy het,” sê Broddelwerk kragtig, “en ek het geen rede om te glo dat jou siening enigiets anders as twak is nie, Dompeldorius. Die Dementors is steeds op diens in Azkaban en doen alles wat ons van hulle verwag.”

“Dan,” sê Dompeldorius sag maar helder, “moet ons onself afvra hoekom iemand binne die Ministerie twee Dementors opdrag gegee het om op die tweede Augustus in daardie laan te wees.”

In die totale stilte wat op hierdie woorde volg, leun die heks regs van Broddelwerk vorentoe sodat Harry haar gesig vir die eerste keer sien.

Sy lyk nes ’n groot bleek skurwepadda. Sy is redelik dik met ’n breë, slapperige gesig, feitlik geen nek soos oom Vernon en ’n baie breë, pap mond. Haar oë is groot, rond en peul effens uit. Tot die klein swart fluweelstrikkie op haar krullerige kort hare lyk vir Harry soos ’n groot vlieg wat sy enige oomblik met ’n taai tong gaan vang.

“Dolores Jane Umbridge, senior ondersekretaresse van die Minister, jy het verlof om te praat,” sê Broddelwerk.

Die heks praat in ’n hoë, meisieagtige, ademlose stemmetjie wat Harry onverhoeds betrap. Hy het gedink sy gaan kwaak.

“Ek is seker ek moet jou verkeerd verstaan het, professor Dompeldorius,” sê sy met ’n aanstellerige glimlaggie, hoewel haar groot oë yskoud bly. “So dom van my. Maar dit het vir ’n klein oomblikkie geklink asof jy probeer sê dat die Ministerie vir Towerkuns opdrag gegee het dat die seun aangeval word.”

Sy uiter ’n tinkelende laggie wat die hare in Harry se nek orent laat staan. ’n Paar ander lede van die Towenaarshoërhof lag saam met haar. Dis egter duidelik dat nie een van hulle dit werklik snaaks vind nie.

“Indien dit waar is dat die Dementors net van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns bevele ontvang, en indien dit ook waar is dat twee Dementors ’n week gelede vir Harry en sy neef aangeval het, dan volg dit logies dat iemand by die Ministerie die opdrag vir die aanval gegee het,” sê Dompeldorius beleef. “Dis natuurlik ook moontlik dat hierdie spesifieke Dementors buite die Ministerie se beheer –”

“Daar is geen Dementors buite die Ministerie se beheer nie!” snou Broddelwerk, wat bloedrooi geword het.

Dompeldorius maak ’n klein buiging met sy kop.

“Dan sal die Ministerie ongetwyfeld ’n volle ondersoek loods om vas te stel hoekom twee Dementors so ver van Azkaban was en hoekom hulle sonder magtiging aangeval het.”

“Dis nie vir jou om te besluit wat die Ministerie vir Towerkuns moet doen nie, Dompeldorius!” snou Broddelwerk, wat nou ’n pers-
mooi kleur is waarop oom Vernon trots sou wees.

“Natuurlik is dit nie,” sê Dompeldorius bedaad. “Ek spreek bloot my vertroude uit dat die saak nie daar gelaat sal word nie.”

Hy kyk na Madame Bones, wat haar oogglas verskuif en met ’n effense frons na hom staar.

“Ek wil almal net daaraan herinner dat die gedrag van die Dementors, indien hulle nie bloot hersenskimme was nie, nie die onderwerp van hierdie verhoor is nie!” sê Broddelwerk. “Ons is hier om Harry Potter se oortredings onder die Ordonnansie vir die Redelike Beperking op Minderjarige Toordery te ondersoek!”

“Natuurlik is ons,” sê Dompeldorius, “maar die teenwoordigheid van Dementors in daardie laan is heeltemal ter sake. Volgens klousule 7 van die Ordonnansie mag towerkuns in buitengewone omstandighede voor Moggels gebruik word indien hierdie buitengewone omstandighede situasies behels wat die lewe van die betrokke towenaar of heks, of enige hekse, towenaars of Moggels wat teenwoordig is, sou bedreig tydens die –

“Ons is bekend met klousule 7, baie dankie!” snou Broddelwerk.

“Natuurlik is julle,” sê Dompeldorius hoflik. “Dan stem ons saam dat Harry se gebruik van die Patronus-towerspreuk in hierdie geval in die kategorie van buitengewone omstandighede val soos beskryf in die klousule?”

“As daar Dementors was – wat ek betwyfel.”

“Jy het dit by ’n ooggetuie gehoor,” sê Dompeldorius vinnig. “As jy haar geloofwaardigheid nog steeds in twyfel trek, roep haar terug en ondervra haar weer. Ek is seker sy sal geen besware hê nie.”

“Ek – dis – nie –” brabbel Broddelwerk en vroetel met die papiere voor hom. “Dis net – ek wil dit vandag afhandel, Dompeldorius!”

“Maar uit die aard van die saak sal jy nie omgee hoeveel keer jy na ’n getuie moet luister as die alternatief ’n ernstige regsdwaling sou wees nie.”

“Ernstige regsdwaling, my voet!” sê Broddelwerk daverend. “Het jy al ooit die moeite gedoen om die aantal wolhaarstories waarmee hierdie seun al vorendag gekom het, bymekaar te tel, Dompeldorius? Alles in ’n poging om sy flagrante misbruik van toordery buite die skool te verdoesel! Ek veronderstel jy’t vergeet van die Hang-en-sweef-towerspreuk wat hy drie jaar gelede –”

"Dit was nie ek nie, dit was 'n huiself!" sê Harry.

"DAAR HET JY DIT!" brul Broddelwerk en wys teatraal na Harry.
" 'n Huiself! In 'n Moggelhuis! Wil jy nou meer!"

"Die betrokke huiself werk op die oomblik by Hogwarts," sê Dompeldorius. "Ek kan hom onmiddellik hierheen ontbied om te getuig as jy wil."

"Ek – het nie – tyd om na huiselwe te luister nie! In elk geval, dis nie al nie – om vadersnaam, hy't sy tante opgeblaas!" skree Broddelwerk en slaan met sy vuus op die regtersbank sodat 'n inkbottel kletterend omval.

"En jy was so gaaf om by daardie geleentheid nie 'n klag te lê nie omdat jy, so reken ek, besef het dat selfs die beste towenaars nie altyd hul humeure kan beteuel nie," sê Dompeldorius bedaard terwyl Broddelwerk sukkel om die ink van sy notas af te vee.

"En ek het nog nie eens begin met wat hy alles by die skool aanvang nie."

"Maar aangesien die Ministerie nie die reg het om Hogwarts-studente te straf vir oortredings by die skool nie, is Harry se gedrag daar nie ter sake by hierdie verhoor nie," sê Dompeldorius net so beleef soos tevore, maar met 'n tikkie kilheid agter sy woorde.

"Oho!" sê Broddelwerk. "Niks met ons te doen wat hy by die skool aanvang nie, nè? Jy dink so?"

"Die Ministerie het nie die reg om Hogwarts-studente te skors nie, Cornelius, soos ek jou op die aand van die tweede Augustus herinner het," sê Dompeldorius. "Die Ministerie het ook nie die reg om towerstawwe te konfiskeer voor die oortreding suksesvol bewys is nie, weer eens soos ek jou op die tweede Augustus herinner het. In jou prysenswaardige haas om seker te maak dat die wet nie oortree word nie, wil dit lyk of jy – ek is seker heeltemal per abuis – self 'n paar wette oor die hoof gesien het."

"Wette kan verander word," sê Broddelwerk wreedaardig.

"Natuurlik kan hulle," sê Dompeldorius en knik sy kop. "En jy het gewis heelwat veranderinge gemaak, Cornelius. Net in die paar weke sedert ek gevra is om die Towenaarshoërhof te verlaat, het dit reeds die gebruik geword om 'n volle kriminele ondersoek te hou vir 'n eenvoudige geval van minderjarige toordery!"

'n Paar van die towenaars skuif ongemaklik in hul sitplekke rond. Broddelwerk word 'n nog dieper skakering van pers. Die paddaagtige heks aan sy regterkant staar net na Dompeldorius, haar gesig heeltemal uitdrukkingloos.

"Na my wete," gaan Dompeldorius voort, "is daar nog geen wet in plek wat sê dit is hierdie hof se werk om Harry te straf vir elke

stukkies toorkuns wat hy nog ooit gedoen het nie. Hy is vir 'n spesifieke oortreding aangekla en hy het sy getuienis gelewer. Al wat hy nou kan doen, is om op jul uitspraak te wag."

Dompeldorius druk weer sy vingerpunte teen mekaar en sê niks verder nie. Broddelwerk gluur duidelik briesend na hom. Harry loer sydelings na Dompeldorius. Hy is glad nie seker dat Dompeldorius die regte ding gedoen het deur vir die Hoërhof te sê dis tyd om 'n besluit te neem nie. Maar dit lyk of Dompeldorius nog steeds onbewus is van Harry se pogings om oogkontak te maak. Hy bly kyk op na die banke waar die hele Towenaarshoërhof in druk fluistergesprekke gewikkel is.

Harry kyk na sy voete. Sy hart, wat voel of dit onnatuurlik groot opgeswel het, pomp pynlik onder sy ribbes. Hy het verwag dat die verhoor langer as dit sou duur. Hy is glad nie seker dat hy 'n goeie indruk gemaak het nie. Hy het nog nie eintlik iets gesê nie. Hy moes in meer besonderhede oor die Dementors gepraat het, oor hoe hy geval het en hoe hy en Dudley amper gesoen is.

Hy kyk twee keer op na Broddelwerk en maak sy mond oop om iets te sê, maar teen dié tyd is sy hart so groot opgeswel dat dit sy lugweë toedruk. Toe haal hy maar net diep asem en kyk weer af na sy skoene.

Die gefluister word stil. Harry wil opkyk na die regters, maar vind dis makliker om eerder sy veters te bestudeer.

"Diegene ten gunste daarvan dat die getuie op alle klagtes vrygespreek word?" sê Madame Bones se daverende stem.

Harry lig sy kop. Daar is hande in die lug, baie van hulle meer as die helfte! Hygend na asem probeer hy tēl, maar voor hy klaar is, sê Madame Bones: "En diegene ten gunste van 'n skuldigbevinding?"

Broddelwerk lig sy hand en so ook 'n halfdosyn van die ander, insluitend die heks aan sy regterkant, die towenaar met die groot snor en die heks met die kroes hare in die tweede ry.

Broddelwerk staar na almal om hom. Dit lyk of iets in sy keel vas-sit. Dan laat sak hy sy hand. Hy trek sy asem diep in en sê in 'n stem verwronge van ingehoue woede: "Goed onskuldig op alle aanklagte."

"Uitstekend," sê Dompeldorius flink, spring orent, haal sy towerstaf uit en toor die twee leunstoele weg. "Wel, ek moet gaan. Tot siens, julle almal."

En hy swiep uit die kerker sonder om een keer na Harry te kyk.

CHAPTER NINE



THE WOES OF MRS. WEASLEY

Dumbledore's abrupt departure took Harry completely by surprise. He remained sitting where he was in the chained chair, struggling with his feelings of shock and relief. The Wizengamot were all getting to their feet, talking, and gathering up their papers and packing them away. Harry stood up. Nobody seemed to be paying him the slightest bit of attention except the toadlike witch on Fudge's right, who was now gazing down at him instead of at Dumbledore. Ignoring her, he tried to catch Fudge's eye, or Madam Bones's, wanting to ask whether he was free to go, but Fudge seemed quite determined not to notice Harry, and Madam Bones was busy with her briefcase, so he took a few tentative steps toward the exit and when nobody called him back, broke into a very fast walk.

He took the last few steps at a run, wrenched open the door, and almost collided with Mr. Weasley, who was standing right outside,

looking pale and apprehensive.

“Dumbledore didn’t say —”

“Cleared,” Harry said, pulling the door closed behind him, “of all charges!”

Beaming, Mr. Weasley seized Harry by the shoulders.

“Harry, that’s wonderful! Well, of course, they couldn’t have found you guilty, not on the evidence, but even so, I can’t pretend I wasn’t —”

But Mr. Weasley broke off, because the courtroom door had just opened again. The Wizengamot were filing out.

“Merlin’s beard,” said Mr. Weasley wonderingly, pulling Harry aside to let them all pass, “you were tried by the full court?”

“I think so,” said Harry quietly.

One or two of the passing wizards nodded to Harry as they passed and a few, including Madam Bones, said, “Morning, Arthur,” to Mr. Weasley, but most averted their eyes. Cornelius Fudge and the toadlike witch were almost the last to leave the dungeon. Fudge acted as though Mr. Weasley and Harry were part of the wall, but again, the witch looked almost appraisingly at Harry as she passed. Last of all to pass was Percy. Like Fudge, he completely ignored his father and Harry; he marched past clutching a large roll of parchment and a handful of spare quills, his back rigid and his nose in the air. The lines around Mr. Weasley’s mouth tightened slightly, but other than this he gave no sign that he had noticed his third son.

“I’m going to take you straight back so you can tell the others the good news,” he said, beckoning Harry forward as Percy’s heels disappeared up the stairs to the ninth level. “I’ll drop you off on the

way to that toilet in Bethnal Green. Come on . . .”

“So what will you have to do about the toilet?” Harry asked, grinning. Everything suddenly seemed five times funnier than usual. It was starting to sink in: He was cleared, *he was going back to Hogwarts.*

“Oh, it’s a simple enough anti-jinx,” said Mr. Weasley as they mounted the stairs, “but it’s not so much having to repair the damage, it’s more the attitude behind the vandalism, Harry. Muggle-baiting might strike some wizards as funny, but it’s an expression of something much deeper and nastier, and I for one —”

Mr. Weasley broke off in mid-sentence. They had just reached the ninth-level corridor, and Cornelius Fudge was standing a few feet away from them, talking quietly to a tall man with sleek blond hair and a pointed, pale face.

The second man turned at the sound of their footsteps. He too broke off in mid-conversation, his cold gray eyes narrowed and fixed upon Harry’s face.

“Well, well, well . . . Patronus Potter,” said Lucius Malfoy coolly.

Harry felt winded, as though he had just walked into something heavy. He had last seen those cool gray eyes through slits in a Death Eater’s hood, and last heard that man’s voice jeering in a dark graveyard while Lord Voldemort tortured him. He could not believe that Lucius Malfoy dared look him in the face; he could not believe that he was here, in the Ministry of Magic, or that Cornelius Fudge was talking to him, when Harry had told Fudge mere weeks ago that Malfoy was a Death Eater.

“The Minister was just telling me about your lucky escape, Potter,”

drawled Mr. Malfoy, "Quite astonishing, the way you continue to wriggle out of very tight holes. . . . *Snakelike*, in fact . . ."

Mr. Weasley gripped Harry's shoulder in warning.

"Yeah," said Harry, "yeah, I'm good at escaping . . ."

Lucius Malfoy raised his eyes to Mr. Weasley's face.

"And Arthur Weasley too! What are you doing here, Arthur?"

"I work here," said Mr. Weasley shortly.

"Not *here*, surely?" said Mr. Malfoy, raising his eyebrows and glancing toward the door over Mr. Weasley's shoulder. "I thought you were up on the second floor. . . . Don't you do something that involves sneaking Muggle artifacts home and bewitching them?"

"No," said Mr. Weasley curtly, his fingers now biting into Harry's shoulder.

"What are *you* doing here anyway?" Harry asked Lucius Malfoy.

"I don't think private matters between myself and the Minister are any concern of yours, Potter," said Malfoy, smoothing the front of his robes; Harry distinctly heard the gentle clinking of what sounded like a full pocket of gold. "Really, just because you are Dumbledore's favorite boy, you must not expect the same indulgence from the rest of us. . . . Shall we go up to your office, then, Minister?"

"Certainly," said Fudge, turning his back on Harry and Mr. Weasley. "This way, Lucius."

They strode off together, talking in low voices. Mr. Weasley did not let go of Harry's shoulder until they had disappeared into the lift.

"Why wasn't he waiting outside Fudge's office if they've got business to do together?" Harry burst out furiously. "What was he doing down here?"

“Trying to sneak down to the courtroom, if you ask me,” said Mr. Weasley, looking extremely agitated as he glanced over his shoulder as though making sure they could not be overheard. “Trying to find out whether you’d been expelled or not. I’ll leave a note for Dumbledore when I drop you off; he ought to know Malfoy’s been talking to Fudge again.”

“What private business have they got together anyway?”

“Gold, I expect,” said Mr. Weasley angrily. “Malfoy’s been giving generously to all sorts of things for years. . . . Gets him in with the right people . . . then he can ask favors . . . delay laws he doesn’t want passed . . . Oh, he’s very well connected, Lucius Malfoy . . .”

The lift arrived; it was empty except for a flock of memos that flapped around Mr. Weasley’s head as he pressed the button for the Atrium and the doors clanged shut; he waved them away irritably.

“Mr. Weasley,” said Harry slowly, “if Fudge is meeting Death Eaters like Malfoy, if he’s seeing them alone, how do we know they haven’t put the Imperius Curse on him?”

“Don’t think it hadn’t occurred to us, Harry,” muttered Mr. Weasley. “But Dumbledore thinks Fudge is acting of his own accord at the moment — which, as Dumbledore says, is not a lot of comfort. . . . Best not talk about it anymore just now, Harry . . .”

The doors slid open and they stepped out into the now almost-deserted Atrium. Eric the security man was hidden behind his *Daily Prophet* again. They had walked straight past the golden fountain before Harry remembered.

“Wait . . .” he told Mr. Weasley, and pulling his money bag from his pocket, he turned back to the fountain.

He looked up into the handsome wizard's face, but up close, Harry thought he looked rather weak and foolish. The witch was wearing a vapid smile like a beauty contestant, and from what Harry knew of goblins and centaurs, they were most unlikely to be caught staring this soporily at humans of any description. Only the house-elf's attitude of creeping servility looked convincing. With a grin at the thought of what Hermione would say if she could see the statue of the elf, Harry turned his money bag upside down and emptied not just ten Galleons, but the whole contents into the pool at the statues' feet.

"I knew it!" yelled Ron, punching the air. "You always get away with stuff!"

"They were bound to clear you," said Hermione, who had looked positively faint with anxiety when Harry had entered the kitchen and was now holding a shaking hand over her eyes. "There was no case against you, none at all . . ."

"Everyone seems quite relieved, though, considering they all knew I'd get off," said Harry, smiling.

Mrs. Weasley was wiping her face on her apron, and Fred, George, and Ginny were doing a kind of war dance to a chant that went "*He got off, he got off, he got off—*"

"That's enough, settle down!" shouted Mr. Weasley, though he too was smiling. "Listen, Sirius, Lucius Malfoy was at the Ministry—"

"What?" said Sirius sharply.

"*He got off, he got off, he got off—*"

"Be quiet, you three! Yes, we saw him talking to Fudge on level nine, then they went up to Fudge's office together. Dumbledore ought to know."

“Absolutely,” said Sirius. “We’ll tell him, don’t worry.”

“Well, I’d better get going, there’s a vomiting toilet in Bethnal Green waiting for me. Molly, I’ll be late, I’m covering for Tonks, but Kingsley might be dropping in for dinner —”

“He got off, he got off, he got off —”

“That’s enough — Fred — George — Ginny!” said Mrs. Weasley, as Mr. Weasley left the kitchen. “Harry dear, come and sit down, have some lunch, you hardly ate breakfast . . .”

Ron and Hermione sat themselves down opposite him looking happier than they had done since he had first arrived at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and Harry’s feeling of giddy relief, which had been somewhat dented by his encounter with Lucius Malfoy, swelled again. The gloomy house seemed warmer and more welcoming all of a sudden; even Kreacher looked less ugly as he poked his snoutlike nose into the kitchen to investigate the source of all the noise.

“‘Course, once Dumbledore turned up on your side, there was no way they were going to convict you,” said Ron happily, now dishing great mounds of mashed potatoes onto everyone’s plates.

“Yeah, he swung it for me,” said Harry. He felt that it would sound highly ungrateful, not to mention childish, to say, “I wish he’d talked to me, though. Or even *looked* at me.”

And as he thought this, the scar on his forehead burned so badly that he clapped his hand to it.

“What’s up?” said Hermione, looking alarmed.

“Scar,” Harry mumbled. “But it’s nothing. . . . It happens all the time now . . .”

None of the others had noticed a thing; all of them were now helping themselves to food while gloating over Harry's narrow escape; Fred, George, and Ginny were still singing. Hermione looked rather anxious, but before she could say anything, Ron said happily, "I bet Dumbledore turns up this evening to celebrate with us, you know."

"I don't think he'll be able to, Ron," said Mrs. Weasley, setting a huge plate of roast chicken down in front of Harry. "He's really very busy at the moment."

"HE GOT OFF, HE GOT OFF, HE GOT OFF—"

"SHUT UP!" roared Mrs. Weasley.

Over the next few days Harry could not help noticing that there was one person within number twelve, Grimmauld Place, who did not seem wholly overjoyed that he would be returning to Hogwarts. Sirius had put up a very good show of happiness on first hearing the news, wringing Harry's hand and beaming just like the rest of them; soon, however, he was moodier and surlier than before, talking less to everybody, even Harry, and spending increasing amounts of time shut up in his mother's room with Buckbeak.

"Don't you go feeling guilty!" said Hermione sternly, after Harry had confided some of his feelings to her and Ron while they scrubbed out a moldy cupboard on the third floor a few days later. "You belong at Hogwarts and Sirius knows it. Personally, I think he's being selfish."

"That's a bit harsh, Hermione," said Ron, frowning as he attempted to prize off a bit of mold that had attached itself firmly to

his finger, "you wouldn't want to be stuck inside this house without company."

"He'll have company!" said Hermione. "It's headquarters to the Order of the Phoenix, isn't it? He just got his hopes up that Harry would be coming to live here with him."

"I don't think that's true," said Harry, wringing out his cloth. "He wouldn't give me a straight answer when I asked him if I could."

"He just didn't want to get his own hopes up even more," said Hermione wisely. "And he probably felt a bit guilty himself, because I think a part of him was really hoping you'd be expelled. Then you'd both be outcasts together."

"Come off it!" said Harry and Ron together, but Hermione merely shrugged.

"Suit yourselves. But I sometimes think Ron's mum's right, and Sirius gets confused about whether you're you or your father, Harry."

"So you think he's touched in the head?" said Harry heatedly.

"No, I just think he's been very lonely for a long time," said Hermione simply.

At this point Mrs. Weasley entered the bedroom behind them.

"Still not finished?" she said, poking her head into the cupboard.

"I thought you might be here to tell us to have a break!" said Ron bitterly. "D'you know how much mold we've got rid of since we arrived here?"

"You were so keen to help the Order," said Mrs. Weasley, "you can do your bit by making headquarters fit to live in."

"I feel like a house-elf," grumbled Ron.

"Well, now that you understand what dreadful lives they lead,

perhaps, you'll be a bit more active in S.P.E.W.!" said Hermione hopefully, as Mrs. Weasley left them to it again. "You know, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to show people exactly how horrible it is to clean all the time — we could do a sponsored scrub of Gryffindor common room, all proceeds to S.P.E.W., it would raise awareness as well as funds —"

"I'll sponsor you to shut up about *spew*," Ron muttered irritably, but only so Harry could hear him.

Harry found himself daydreaming about Hogwarts more and more as the end of the holidays approached; he could not wait to see Hagrid again, to play Quidditch, even to stroll across the vegetable patches to the Herbology greenhouses. It would be a treat just to leave this dusty, musty house, where half of the cupboards were still bolted shut and Kreacher wheezed insults out of the shadows as you passed, though Harry was careful not to say any of this within earshot of Sirius.

The fact was that living at the headquarters of the anti-Voldemort movement was not nearly as interesting or exciting as Harry would have expected before he'd experienced it. Though members of the Order of the Phoenix came and went regularly, sometimes staying for meals, sometimes only for a few minutes' whispered conversation, Mrs. Weasley made sure that Harry and the others were kept well out of earshot (whether Extendable or normal) and nobody, not even Sirius, seemed to feel that Harry needed to know anything more than he had heard on the night of his arrival.

On the very last day of the holidays Harry was sweeping up Hedwig's owl droppings from the top of the wardrobe when Ron

entered their bedroom carrying a couple of envelopes.

“Booklists have arrived,” he said, throwing one of the envelopes up to Harry, who was standing on a chair. “About time, I thought they’d forgotten, they usually come much earlier than this. . .”

Harry swept the last of the droppings into a rubbish bag and threw the bag over Ron’s head into the wastepaper basket in the corner, which swallowed it and belched loudly. He then opened his letter. It contained two pieces of parchment, one the usual reminder that term started on the first of September, the other telling him which books he would need for the coming year.

“Only two new ones,” he said, reading the list. “*The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5*, by Miranda Goshawk and *Defensive Magical Theory*, by Wilbert Slinkhard.”

Crack.

Fred and George Apparated right beside Harry. He was so used to them doing this by now that he didn’t even fall off his chair.

“We were just wondering who assigned the Slinkhard book,” said Fred conversationally.

“Because it means Dumbledore’s found a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher,” said George.

“And about time too,” said Fred.

“What d’you mean?” Harry asked, jumping down beside them.

“Well, we overheard Mum and Dad talking on the Extendable Ears a few weeks back,” Fred told Harry, “and from what they were saying, Dumbledore was having real trouble finding anyone to do the job this year.”

“Not surprising, is it, when you look at what’s happened to the last

four?" said George.

"One sacked, one dead, one's memory removed, and one locked in a trunk for nine months," said Harry, counting them off on his fingers. "Yeah, I see what you mean."

"What's up with you, Ron?" asked Fred.

Ron did not answer. Harry looked around. Ron was standing very still with his mouth slightly open, gaping at his letter from Hogwarts.

"What's the matter?" said Fred impatiently, moving around Ron to look over his shoulder at the parchment.

Fred's mouth fell open too.

"Prefect?" he said, staring incredulously at the letter. "*Prefect?*"

George leapt forward, seized the envelope in Ron's other hand, and turned it upside down. Harry saw something scarlet and gold fall into George's palm.

"No way," said George in a hushed voice.

"There's been a mistake," said Fred, snatching the letter out of Ron's grasp and holding it up to the light as though checking for a watermark. "No one in their right mind would make Ron a prefect . . ."

The twins' heads turned in unison and both of them stared at Harry.

"We thought you were a cert!" said Fred in a tone that suggested Harry had tricked them in some way.

"We thought Dumbledore was *bound* to pick you!" said George indignantly.

"Winning the Triwizard and everything!" said Fred.

"I suppose all the mad stuff must've counted against him," said

George to Fred.

“Yeah,” said Fred slowly. “Yeah, you’ve caused too much trouble, mate. Well, at least one of you’s got their priorities right.”

He strode over to Harry and clapped him on the back while giving Ron a scathing look.

“*Prefect . . . ickle Ronnie the prefect . . .*”

“Oh, Mum’s going to be revolting,” groaned George, thrusting the prefect badge back at Ron as though it might contaminate him.

Ron, who still had not said a word, took the badge, stared at it for a moment, and then held it out to Harry as though asking mutely for confirmation that it was genuine. Harry took it. A large P was superimposed on the Gryffindor lion. He had seen a badge just like this on Percy’s chest on his very first day at Hogwarts.

The door banged open. Hermione came tearing into the room, her cheeks flushed and her hair flying. There was an envelope in her hand.

“Did you — did you get — ?”

She spotted the badge in Harry’s hand and let out a shriek.

“I knew it!” she said excitedly, brandishing her letter. “Me too, Harry, me too!”

“No,” said Harry quickly, pushing the badge back into Ron’s hand. “It’s Ron, not me.”

“It — what?”

“Ron’s prefect, not me,” Harry said.

“*Ron?*” said Hermione, her jaw dropping. “But . . . are you sure? I mean —”

She turned red as Ron looked around at her with a defiant expression on his face.

"It's my name on the letter," he said.

"I . . ." said Hermione, looking thoroughly bewildered. "I well . . . wow! Well done, Ron! That's really —"

"Unexpected," said George, nodding.

"No," said Hermione, blushing harder than ever, "no, it's not Ron's done loads of . . . he's really . . ."

The door behind her opened a little wider and Mrs. Weasley backed into the room carrying a pile of freshly laundered robes.

"Ginny said the booklists had come at last," she said, glancing around at all the envelopes as she made her way over to the bed and started sorting the robes into two piles. "If you give them to me I'll take them over to Diagon Alley this afternoon and get your books while you're packing. Ron, I'll have to get you more pajamas, these are at least six inches too short. I can't believe how fast you're growing . . . what color would you like?"

"Get him red and gold to match his badge," said George, smirking.

"Match his what?" said Mrs. Weasley absently, rolling up a pair of maroon socks and placing them on Ron's pile.

"His *badge*," said Fred, with the air of getting the worst over quickly. "His lovely shiny new *prefect's badge*."

Fred's words took a moment to penetrate Mrs. Weasley's preoccupation about pajamas.

"His . . . but . . . Ron, you're not . . . ?"

Ron held up his badge.

Mrs. Weasley let out a shriek just like Hermione's.

"I don't believe it! I don't believe it! Oh, Ron, how wonderful! A prefect! That's everyone in the family!"

"What are Fred and I, next-door neighbors?" said George indignantly, as his mother pushed him aside and flung her arms around her youngest son.

"Wait until your father hears! Ron, I'm so proud of you, what wonderful news, you could end up Head Boy just like Bill and Percy, it's the first step! Oh, what a thing to happen in the middle of all this worry, I'm just thrilled, oh *Ronnie* —"

Fred and George were both making loud retching noises behind her back but Mrs. Weasley did not notice; arms tight around Ron's neck, she was kissing him all over his face, which had turned a brighter scarlet than his badge.

"Mum . . . don't . . . Mum, get a grip . . ." he muttered, trying to push her away.

She let go of him and said breathlessly, "Well, what will it be? We gave Percy an owl, but you've already got one, of course."

"W-what do you mean?" said Ron, looking as though he did not dare believe his ears.

"You've got to have a reward for this!" said Mrs. Weasley fondly. "How about a nice new set of dress robes?"

"We've already bought him some," said Fred sourly, who looked as though he sincerely regretted this generosity.

"Or a new cauldron, Charlie's old one's rusting through, or a new rat, you always liked Scabbers —"

"Mum," said Ron hopefully, "can I have a new broom?" Mrs. Weasley's face fell slightly; broomsticks were expensive.

“Not a really good one!” Ron hastened to add. “Just — just a new one for a change . . .”

Mrs. Weasley hesitated, then smiled.

“Of *course* you can. . . . Well, I’d better get going if I’ve got a broom to buy too. I’ll see you all later. . . . Little Ronnie, a prefect! And don’t forget to pack your trunks. . . . A prefect. . . . Oh, I’m all of a dither!”

She gave Ron yet another kiss on the cheek, sniffed loudly, and bustled from the room.

Fred and George exchanged looks.

“You don’t mind if we don’t kiss you, do you, Ron?” said Fred in a falsely anxious voice.

“We could curtsy, if you like,” said George.

“Oh, shut up,” said Ron, scowling at them.

“Or what?” said Fred, an evil grin spreading across his face. “Going to put us in detention?”

“I’d love to see him try,” sniggered George.

“He could if you don’t watch out!” said Hermione angrily, at which Fred and George burst out laughing and Ron muttered, “Drop it, Hermione.”

“We’re going to have to watch our step, George,” said Fred, pretending to tremble, “with these two on our case . . .”

“Yeah, it looks like our law-breaking days are finally over,” said George, shaking his head.

And with another loud *crack*, the twins Disappeared.

“Those two!” said Hermione furiously, staring up at the ceiling.

through which they could now hear Fred and George roaring with laughter in the room upstairs. "Don't pay any attention to them, Ron, they're only jealous!"

"I don't think they are," said Ron doubtfully, also looking up at the ceiling. "They've always said only prats become prefects. . . . Still," he added on a happier note, "they've never had new brooms! I wish I could go with Mum and choose. . . . She'll never be able to afford a Nimbus, but there's the new Cleansweep out, that'd be great. . . . Yeah, I think I'll go and tell her I like the Cleansweep, just so she knows . . ."

He dashed from the room, leaving Harry and Hermione alone.

For some reason, Harry found that he did not want to look at Hermione. He turned to his bed, picked up the pile of clean robes Mrs. Weasley had laid upon it, and crossed the room to his trunk.

"Harry?" said Hermione tentatively.

"Well done," said Harry, so heartily it did not sound like his voice at all, and still not looking at her. "Brilliant. Prefect. Great."

"Thanks," said Hermione. "Erm — Harry — could I borrow Hedwig so I can tell Mum and Dad? They'll be really pleased — I mean, prefect is something they can understand —"

"Yeah, no problem," said Harry, still in the horrible hearty voice that did not belong to him. "Take her!"

He leaned over his trunk, laid the robes on the bottom of it, and pretended to be rummaging for something while Hermione crossed to the wardrobe and called Hedwig down. A few moments passed; Harry heard the door close but remained bent double, listening; the only sounds he could hear were the blank picture on the wall

sniggering again and the wastepaper basket in the corner coughing up the owl droppings.

He straightened up and looked behind him. Hermione and Hedwig had gone. Harry returned slowly to his bed and sank onto it, gazing unseeingly at the foot of the wardrobe.

He had forgotten completely about prefects being chosen in the fifth year. He had been too anxious about the possibility of being expelled to spare a thought for the fact that badges must be winging their way toward certain people. But if he *had* remembered . . . if he *had* thought about it . . . what would he have expected?

Not this, said a small and truthful voice inside his head.

Harry screwed up his face and buried it in his hands. He could not lie to himself; if he had known the prefect badge was on its way, he would have expected it to come to him, not Ron. Did this make him as arrogant as Draco Malfoy? Did he think himself superior to everyone else? Did he really believe he was *better* than Ron?

No, said the small voice defiantly.

Was that true? Harry wondered, anxiously probing his own feelings.

I'm better at Quidditch, said the voice. *But I'm not better at anything else.*

That was definitely true, Harry thought; he was no better than Ron in lessons. But what about outside lessons? What about those adventures he, Ron, and Hermione had had together since they had started at Hogwarts, often risking much worse than expulsion?

Well, Ron and Hermione were with me most of the time, said the voice in Harry's head.

Not all the time, though, Harry argued with himself. They didn't fight Quirrell with me. They didn't take on Riddle and the basilisk. They didn't get rid of all those dementors the night Sirius escaped. They weren't in that graveyard with me, the night Voldemort returned. . . .

And the same feeling of ill usage that had overwhelmed him on the night he had arrived rose again. *I've definitely done more, Harry thought indignantly. I've done more than either of them!*

But maybe, said the small voice fairly, maybe Dumbledore doesn't choose prefects because they've got themselves into a load of dangerous situations. . . . Maybe he chooses them for other reasons. . . . Ron must have something you don't. . . .

Harry opened his eyes and stared through his fingers at the wardrobe's clawed feet, remembering what Fred had said:

"No one in their right mind would make Ron a prefect. . . ."

Harry gave a small snort of laughter. A second later he felt sickened with himself.

Ron had not asked Dumbledore to give him the prefect badge. This was not Ron's fault. Was he, Harry, Ron's best friend in the world, going to sulk because he didn't have a badge, laugh with the twins behind Ron's back, ruin this for Ron when, for the first time, he had beaten Harry at something?

At this point Harry heard Ron's footsteps on the stairs again. He stood up, straightened his glasses, and hitched a grin onto his face as Ron bounded back through the door.

"Just caught her!" he said happily. "She says she'll get the Cleansweep if she can."

“Cool,” Harry said, and he was relieved to hear that his voice had stopped sounding hearty. “Listen — Ron — well done, mate.”

The smile faded off Ron’s face.

“I never thought it would be me!” he said, shaking his head, “I thought it would be you!”

“Nah, I’ve caused too much trouble,” Harry said, echoing Fred.

“Yeah,” said Ron, “yeah, I suppose. . . . Well, we’d better get our trunks packed, hadn’t we?”

It was odd how widely their possessions seemed to have scattered themselves since they had arrived. It took them most of the afternoon to retrieve their books and belongings from all over the house and stow them back inside their school trunks. Harry noticed that Ron kept moving his prefect’s badge around, first placing it on his bedside table, then putting it into his jeans pocket, then taking it out and laying it on his folded robes, as though to see the effect of the red on the black. Only when Fred and George dropped in and offered to attach it to his forehead with a Permanent Sticking Charm did he wrap it tenderly in his maroon socks and lock it in his trunk.

Mrs. Weasley returned from Diagon Alley around six o’clock, laden with books and carrying a long package wrapped in thick brown paper that Ron took from her with a moan of longing.

“Never mind unwrapping it now, people are arriving for dinner, I want you all downstairs,” she said, but the moment she was out of sight Ron ripped off the paper in a frenzy and examined every inch of his new broom, an ecstatic expression on his face.

Down in the basement Mrs. Weasley had hung a scarlet banner over the heavily laden dinner table, which read CONGRATULATIONS

RON AND HERMIONE — NEW PREFECTS. She looked in a better mood than Harry had seen her all holiday.

“I thought we’d have a little party, not a sit-down dinner,” she told Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Ginny as they entered the room. “Your father and Bill are on their way, Ron, I’ve sent them both owls and they’re *thrilled*,” she added, beaming.

Fred rolled his eyes.

Sirius, Lupin, Tonks, and Kingsley Shacklebolt were already there and Mad-Eye Moody stumped in shortly after Harry had got himself a butterbeer.

“Oh, Alastor, I am glad you’re here,” said Mrs. Weasley brightly, as Mad-Eye shrugged off his traveling cloak. “We’ve been wanting to ask you for ages — could you have a look in the writing desk in the drawing room and tell us what’s inside it? We haven’t wanted to open it just in case it’s something really nasty.”

“No problem, Molly . . .”

Moody’s electric-blue eye swiveled upward and stared fixedly through the ceiling of the kitchen.

“Drawing room . . .” he growled, as the pupil contracted. “Desk in the corner? Yeah, I see it . . . Yeah, it’s a boggart . . . Want me to go up and get rid of it, Molly?”

“No, no, I’ll do it myself later,” beamed Mrs. Weasley. “You have your drink. We’re having a little bit of a celebration, actually . . .” She gestured at the scarlet banner. “Fourth prefect in the family!” she said fondly, ruffling Ron’s hair.

“Prefect, eh?” growled Moody, his normal eye on Ron and his magical eye swiveling around to gaze into the side of his head. Harry

had the very uncomfortable feeling it was looking at him and moved away toward Sirius and Lupin.

“Well, congratulations,” said Moody, still glaring at Ron with his normal eye, “authority figures always attract trouble, but I suppose Dumbledore thinks you can withstand most major jinxes or he wouldn’t have appointed you . . .”

Ron looked rather startled at this view of the matter but was saved the trouble of responding by the arrival of his father and eldest brother. Mrs. Weasley was in such a good mood she did not even complain that they had brought Mundungus with them too; he was wearing a long overcoat that seemed oddly lumpy in unlikely places and declined the offer to remove it and put it with Moody’s traveling cloak.

“Well, I think a toast is in order,” said Mr. Weasley, when everyone had a drink. He raised his goblet. “To Ron and Hermione, the new Gryffindor prefects!”

Ron and Hermione beamed as everyone drank to them and then applauded.

“I was never a prefect myself,” said Tonks brightly from behind Harry as everybody moved toward the table to help themselves to food. Her hair was tomato-red and waist length today; she looked like Ginny’s older sister. “My Head of House said I lacked certain necessary qualities.”

“Like what?” said Ginny, who was choosing a baked potato.

“Like the ability to behave myself,” said Tonks.

Ginny laughed; Hermione looked as though she did not know whether to smile or not and compromised by taking an extra large

gulp of butterbeer and choking on it.

“What about you, Sirius?” Ginny asked, thumping Hermione on the back.

Sirius, who was right beside Harry, let out his usual barklike laugh.

“No one would have made me a prefect, I spent too much time in detention with James. Lupin was the good boy, he got the badge.”

“I think Dumbledore might have hoped that I would be able to exercise some control over my best friends,” said Lupin. “I need scarcely say that I failed dismally.”

Harry’s mood suddenly lifted. His father had not been a prefect either. All at once the party seemed much more enjoyable; he loaded up his plate, feeling unusually fond of everyone in the room.

Ron was rhapsodizing about his new broom to anybody who would listen.

“... naught to seventy in ten seconds, not bad, is it? When you think the Comet Two Ninety’s only naught to sixty and that’s with a decent tailwind according to *Which Broomstick?*”

Hermione was talking very earnestly to Lupin about her view of elf rights.

“I mean, it’s the same kind of nonsense as werewolf segregation, isn’t it? It all stems from this horrible thing wizards have of thinking they’re superior to other creatures . . .”

Mrs. Weasley and Bill were having their usual argument about Bill’s hair.

“... getting really out of hand, and you’re so good-looking, it would look much better shorter, wouldn’t it, Harry?”

“Oh — I dunno —” said Harry, slightly alarmed at being asked his opinion; he slid away from them in the direction of Fred and George, who were huddled in a corner with Mundungus.

Mundungus stopped talking when he saw Harry, but Fred winked and beckoned Harry closer.

“It’s okay,” he told Mundungus, “we can trust Harry, he’s our financial backer.”

“Look what Dung’s gotten us,” said George, holding out his hand to Harry. It was full of what looked like shriveled black pods. A faint rattling noise was coming from them, even though they were completely stationary.

“Venomous Tentacula seeds,” said George. “We need them for the Skiving Snackboxes but they’re a Class C Non-Tradeable Substance so we’ve been having a bit of trouble getting hold of them.”

“Ten Galleons the lot, then, Dung?” said Fred.

“Wiv all the trouble I went to to get ’em?” said Mundungus, his saggy, bloodshot eyes stretching even wider. “I’m sorry, lads, but I’m not taking a Knut under twenty.”

“Dung likes his little joke,” Fred said to Harry.

“Yeah, his best one so far has been six Sickles for a bag of knarl quills,” said George.

“Be careful,” Harry warned them quietly.

“What?” said Fred. “Mum’s busy cooing over Prefect Ron, we’re okay.”

“But Moody could have his eye on you,” Harry pointed out.

Mundungus looked nervously over his shoulder.

“Good point, that,” he grunted. “All right, lads, ten it is, if you’ll

take 'em quick."

"Cheers, Harry!" said Fred delightedly, when Mundungus had emptied his pockets into the twins' outstretched hands and scuttled off toward the food. "We'd better get these upstairs . . ."

Harry watched them go, feeling slightly uneasy. It had just occurred to him that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would want to know how Fred and George were financing their joke shop business when, as was inevitable, they finally found out about it. Giving the twins his Triwizard winnings had seemed a simple thing to do at the time, but what if it led to another family row and a Percy-like estrangement? Would Mrs. Weasley still feel that Harry was as good as her son if she found out he had made it possible for Fred and George to start a career she thought quite unsuitable?

Standing where the twins had left him with nothing but a guilty weight in the pit of his stomach for company, Harry caught the sound of his own name. Kingsley Shacklebolt's deep voice was audible even over the surrounding chatter.

"... why Dumbledore didn't make Potter a prefect?" said Kingsley.

"He'll have had his reasons," replied Lupin.

"But it would've shown confidence in him. It's what I'd've done," persisted Kingsley, "specially with the *Daily Prophet* having a go at him every few days . . ."

Harry did not look around; he did not want Lupin or Kingsley to know he had heard. He followed Mundungus back toward the table, though not remotely hungry. His pleasure in the party had evaporated as quickly as it had come; he wished he were upstairs in bed.

Mad-Eye Moody was sniffing at a chicken leg with what remained of his nose; evidently he could not detect any trace of poison, because he then tore a strip off it with his teeth.

“... the handle’s made of Spanish oak with anti-jinx varnish and in-built vibration control —” Ron was saying to Tonks.

Mrs. Weasley yawned widely.

“Well, I think I’ll sort out that boggart before I turn in. . . . Arthur, I don’t want this lot up too late, all right? ’Night, Harry, dear.”

She left the kitchen. Harry set down his plate and wondered whether he could follow her without attracting attention.

“You all right, Potter?” grunted Moody.

“Yeah, fine,” lied Harry.

Moody took a swig from his hip flask, his electric blue eye staring sideways at Harry.

“Come here, I’ve got something that might interest you,” he said.

From an inner pocket of his robes Moody pulled a very tattered old Wizing photograph.

“Original Order of the Phoenix,” growled Moody. “Found it last night when I was looking for my spare Invisibility Cloak, seeing as Podmore hasn’t had the manners to return my best one. . . . Thought people might like to see it.”

Harry took the photograph. A small crowd of people, some waving at him, others lifting their glasses, looked back up at him.

“There’s me,” said Moody unnecessarily, pointing at himself. The Moody in the picture was unmistakable, though his hair was slightly less gray and his nose was intact. “And there’s Dumbledore beside me, Dedalus Diggle on the other side. . . . That’s Marlene McKinnon,

she was killed two weeks after this was taken, they got her whole family. That's Frank and Alice Longbottom —"

Harry's stomach, already uncomfortable, clenched as he looked at Alice Longbottom; he knew her round, friendly face very well, even though he had never met her, because she was the image of her son, Neville.

"Poor devils," growled Moody. "Better dead than what happened to them . . . and that's Emmeline Vance, you've met her, and that there's Lupin, obviously . . . Benjy Fenwick, he copped it too, we only ever found bits of him . . . shift aside there," he added, poking the picture, and the little photographic people edged sideways, so that those who were partially obscured could move to the front.

"That's Edgar Bones . . . brother of Amelia Bones, they got him and his family too, he was a great wizard . . . Sturgis Podmore, blimey, he looks young . . . Caradoc Dearborn, vanished six months after this, we never found his body . . . Hagrid, of course, looks exactly the same as ever . . . Elphias Doge, you've met him, I'd forgotten he used to wear that stupid hat . . . Gideon Prewett, it took five Death Eaters to kill him and his brother Fabian, they fought like heroes . . . budge along, budge along . . ."

The little people in the photograph jostled among themselves, and those hidden right at the back appeared at the forefront of the picture.

"That's Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth, only time I ever met him, strange bloke . . . That's Dorcas Meadows, Voldemort killed her personally . . . Sirius, when he still had short hair . . . and . . . there you go, thought that would interest you!"

Harry's heart turned over. His mother and father were beaming up

at him, sitting on either side of a small, watery-eyed man Harry recognized at once as Wormtail. He was the one who had betrayed their whereabouts to Voldemort and so helped bring about their deaths.

“Eh?” said Moody.

Harry looked up into Moody’s heavily scarred and pitted face. Evidently Moody was under the impression he had just given Harry a bit of a treat.

“Yeah,” said Harry, attempting to grin again. “Er . . . listen, I’ve just remembered, I haven’t packed my . . .”

He was spared the trouble of inventing an object he had not packed; Sirius had just said, “What’s that you’ve got there, Mad-Eye?” and Moody had turned toward him. Harry crossed the kitchen, slipped through the door and up the stairs before anyone could call him back.

He did not know why he had received such a shock; he had seen his parents’ pictures before, after all, and he had met Wormtail . . . but to have them sprung on him like that, when he was least expecting it . . . No one would like that, he thought angrily . . .

And then, to see them surrounded by all those other happy faces . . . Benjy Fenwick, who had been found in bits, and Gideon Prewett, who had died like a hero, and the Longbottoms, who had been tortured into madness . . . all waving happily out of the photograph forevermore, not knowing that they were doomed. . . . Well, Moody might find that interesting . . . he, Harry, found it disturbing. . . .

Harry tiptoed up the stairs in the hall past the stuffed elf heads,

glad to be on his own again, but as he approached the first landing he heard noises. Someone was sobbing in the drawing room.

“Hello?” Harry said.

There was no answer but the sobbing continued. He climbed the remaining stairs two at a time, walked across the landing, and opened the drawing-room door.

Someone was cowering against the dark wall, her wand in her hand, her whole body shaking with sobs. Sprawled on the dusty old carpet in a patch of moonlight, clearly dead, was Ron.

All the air seemed to vanish from Harry’s lungs; he felt as though he were falling through the floor; his brain turned icy cold — Ron dead, no, it couldn’t be —

But wait a moment, it *couldn’t* be — Ron was downstairs —

“Mrs. Weasley?” Harry croaked.

“*R-r-riddikulus!*” Mrs. Weasley sobbed, pointing her shaking wand at Ron’s body.

Crack.

Ron’s body turned into Bill’s, spread-eagled on his back, his eyes wide open and empty. Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever.

“*R-riddikulus!*” she sobbed again.

Crack.

Mr. Weasley’s body replaced Bill’s, his glasses askew, a trickle of blood running down his face.

“No!” Mrs. Weasley moaned. “No . . . *riddikulus! Riddikulus! RIDDIKULUS!*”

Crack. Dead twins. *Crack.* Dead Percy. *Crack.* Dead Harry . . .

“Mrs. Weasley, just get out of here!” shouted Harry, staring down at his own dead body on the floor. “Let someone else —”

“What’s going on?”

Lupin had come running into the room, closely followed by Sirius, with Moody stumping along behind them. Lupin looked from Mrs. Weasley to the dead Harry on the floor and seemed to understand in an instant. Pulling out his own wand he said, very firmly and clearly, “*Riddikulus!*”

Harry’s body vanished. A silvery orb hung in the air over the spot where it had lain. Lupin waved his wand once more and the orb vanished in a puff of smoke.

“Oh — oh — oh!” gulped Mrs. Weasley, and she broke into a storm of crying, her face in her hands.

“Molly,” said Lupin bleakly, walking over to her, “Molly, don’t . . .”

Next second she was sobbing her heart out on Lupin’s shoulder.

“Molly, it was just a boggart,” he said soothingly, patting her on the head. “Just a stupid boggart . . .”

“I see them d-d-dead all the time!” Mrs. Weasley moaned into his shoulder. “All the t-t-time! I d-d-dream about it . . .”

Sirius was staring at the patch of carpet where the boggart, pretending to be Harry’s body, had lain. Moody was looking at Harry, who avoided his gaze. He had a funny feeling Moody’s magical eye had followed him all the way out of the kitchen.

“D-d-don’t tell Arthur,” Mrs. Weasley was gulping now, mopping her eyes frantically with her cuffs. “I d-d-don’t want him to know. . . . Being silly . . .”

Lupin handed her a handkerchief and she blew her nose.

“Harry, I’m so sorry, what must you think of me?” she said shakily.

“Not even able to get rid of a boggart . . .”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Harry, trying to smile.

“I’m just s-s-so worried,” she said, tears spilling out of her eyes again. “Half the f-f-family’s in the Order, it’ll b-b-be a miracle if we all come through this. . . . and P-P-Percy’s not talking to us. . . . What if something d-d-dreadful happens and we had never m-m-made up? And what’s going to happen if Arthur and I get killed, who’s g-g-going to look after Ron and Ginny?”

“Molly, that’s enough,” said Lupin firmly. “This isn’t like last time. The Order is better prepared, we’ve got a head start, we know what Voldemort’s up to —”

Mrs. Weasley gave a little squeak of fright at the sound of the name.

“Oh, Molly, come on, it’s about time you got used to hearing it — look, I can’t promise no one’s going to get hurt, nobody can promise that, but we’re much better off than we were last time, you weren’t in the Order then, you don’t understand, last time we were outnumbered twenty to one by the Death Eaters and they were picking us off one by one . . .”

Harry thought of the photograph again, of his parents’ beaming faces. He knew Moody was still watching him.

“Don’t worry about Percy,” said Sirius abruptly. “He’ll come round. It’s a matter of time before Voldemort moves into the open; once he does, the whole Ministry’s going to be begging us to forgive them. And I’m not sure I’ll be accepting their apology,” he added.

bitterly.

“And as for who’s going to look after Ron and Ginny if you and Arthur died,” said Lupin, smiling slightly, “what do you think we’d do, let them starve?”

Mrs. Weasley smiled tremulously.

“Being silly,” she muttered again, mopping her eyes.

But Harry, closing his bedroom door behind him some ten minutes later, could not think Mrs. Weasley silly. He could still see his parents beaming up at him from the tattered old photograph, unaware that their lives, like so many of those around them, were drawing to a close. The image of the boggart posing as the corpse of each member of Mrs. Weasley’s family in turn kept flashing before his eyes.

Without warning, the scar on his forehead seared with pain again and his stomach churned horribly.

“Cut it out,” he said firmly, rubbing the scar as the pain receded again.

“First sign of madness, talking to your own head,” said a sly voice from the empty picture on the wall.

Harry ignored it. He felt older than he had ever felt in his life, and it seemed extraordinary to him that barely an hour ago he had been worried about a joke shop and who had gotten a prefect’s badge.

Mevrou Weasley se beproewing

Dompeldorius se skielike vertrek betrap Harry onverhoeds. Hy bly net daar in die stoel met kettings sit en worstel met sy gevoelens van skok en verligting. Die lede van die Towenaarshoërhof staan geselsend op en begin hul papiere bymekaarmaak en wegpak. Harry staan op. Niemand steur hulle hoegenaamd aan hom nie, behalwe die padda-agtige heks aan Broddelwerk se regterkant wat stip na hom staar. Hy ignoreer haar en probeer Broddelwerk of Madame Bones se oog vang sodat hy kan uitvind of hy mag gaan, maar Broddelwerk is duidelik nie van plan om Harry raak te sien nie en Madame Bones is besig met haar aktetas, dus gee hy 'n paar aarselende tree na die uitgang en slaan oor na 'n vinnige drafstap toe niemand hom terugroep nie.

Hy hardloop die laaste paar tree, ruk die deur oop en hardloop amper in meneer Weasley vas, wat bleek en bekommerd op die drumpel staan.

“Dompeldorius het nie gesê —”

“Vrygespreek,” sê Harry en trek die deur agter hom toe, “op alle aanklagte!”

Meneer Weasley gryp Harry stralend aan die skouers.

“Harry, dis wonderlik! Wel, hulle kon jou natuurlik nie skuldig bevind nie, nie met die getuienis nie, maar tog, ek sal nie voorgee dat ek —”

Meneer Weasley bly stil. Die hofsaal se deur het weer oopgegaan en die Towenaarshoërhof stap uit.

“Merlin se baard!” roep meneer Weasley verwonderd uit en trek Harry uit die pad sodat hulle kan verbykom. “Dan is jy deur die volle hof verhoor?”

“Ek dink so,” sê Harry gedemp.

Een of twee van die towenaars knik vir Harry toe hulle verbystap en 'n paar, insluitend Madame Bones, sê: “Môre, Arthur,” maar die meeste keer hul oë weg. Cornelius Broddelwerk en die padda-agtige heks kom feitlik heel laaste uit die kerker. Broddelwerk maak asof

meneer Weasley en Harry deel van die muur is, maar die heks kyk amper takserend na Harry. Die heel laaste een wat uitstap, is Percy. Soos Broddelwerk ignoreer hy sy pa en Harry en marsjeer neus in die lug met 'n stokstye rug verby. Hy dra 'n groot rol perkament en 'n hand vol ekstra veerpenne. Die plooi om meneer Weasley se mond word effens dieper, maar hy gee geen verdere tekens dat hy sy derde seun gesien het nie.

"Ek neem jou nou dadelik terug sodat jy die goeie nuus vir die ander kan vertel," sê hy en wys Harry moet hom volg toe Percy met die trap op na Vlak 9 verdwyn het. "Ek sal jou op pad na daardie toilet in Bethnal Green aflaai. Kom . . ."

"Wat gaan julle met daai toilet maak?" vra Harry en grinnik. Alles voel skielik vyf keer snaakser as gewoonlik. Dis besig om in te sink: hy is vrygespreek, *hy gaan terug Hogwarts toe.*

"O, dis 'n baie eenvoudige antivloek," sê meneer Weasley terwyl hulle met die trappe na Vlak 9 opstap, "maar dis nie soseer die skade wat herstel moet word nie, dis meer die gemoedsgesteldheid agter die vandalisme, Harry. Om Moggels te treiter, is dalk vir sommige towenaars pret, maar dis 'n uitdrukking van iets baie diepers en gemeners en ek –"

Meneer Weasley voltooi nie sy sin nie. Hulle is in die gang op die negende verdieping. Cornelius Broddelwerk staan 'n paar tree verder in druk gesprek met 'n lang man met gladde blonde hare en 'n skerp, bleek gesig.

Die man kyk om toe hy hul voetstappe hoor. Hy bly ook dadelik stil en sy koue grys oë vernou terwyl hy na Harry staar.

"Wel, wel, wel . . . Patronus Potter," sê Lucius Malfoy kil.

Harry voel winduit geslaan, asof hy so pas in iets solieds vasge-loop het. Hy het daardie koue grys oë laas deur splete in 'n Doodseter se kap gesien en daardie tartende stem laas in 'n donker begraaftplaas gehoor terwyl die heer Woldemort Harry gemartel het. Hy kan nie glo dat Lucius Malfoy dit durf waag om hom in die oë te kyk nie. Hy kan nie glo dat Malfoy *hier* in die Ministerie vir Towerkuns is nie en dat Cornelius Broddelwerk luiters met hom gesels nadat Harry enkele weke gelede vir Broddelwerk gesê het Malfoy is 'n Doodseter.

"Die Minister het my nou net van jou noue ontkoming vertel, Potter," sê Malfoy dralend: "Uiters verrassend, die manier waarop jy daarin slaag om jou uit verknorsings te wikkkel, om die waarheid te sê, dis amper . . . *slangagtig.*"

Meneer Weasley druk Harry se skouer waarskuwend.

"Ja," sê Harry, "ja, ek is goed met ontsnappings."

Lucius Malfoy se oë draai na meneer Weasley. "En Arthur Weasley ook! Wat doen jy hier, Arthur?"

"Ek werk hier," sê meneer Weasley kortaf.

"Dareem seker nie hier nie?" sê Malfoy. Hy lig sy wenkbroue en tuur oor meneer Weasley se skouer na die deur. "Ek dag jy's op die tweede verdieping. . . . Doen jy nie iets soos Moggelartefakte huis toe smokkel en toor nie?"

"Nee," snou meneer Weasley en sy vingers boor in Harry se skouer.

"Wat doen jy in elk geval hier?" vra Harry vir Lucius Malfoy.

"Ek dink nie privaat sake tussen my en die Minister het enigiets met jou te doen nie, Potter." Malfoy stryk oor die voorkant van sy kleed en Harry hoor 'n sagte getinkel wat soos 'n sak vol goud klink. "Net omdat jy Dompeldorius se witbroodjie is, moet jy nie dieselfde koestering van die res van ons verwag nie. . . . Sal ons na jou kantoor gaan, Minister?"

"Sekerlik," sê Broddelwerk en draai sy rug op Harry en meneer Weasley. "Hierlangs, Lucius."

Hulle stap saam weg terwyl hulle saggies praat. Meneer Weasley los Harry se skouer eers toe Malfoy-hulle in die hysbak is.

"Hoekom wag hy nie buite voor Broddelwerk se kantoor as hulle besigheid het nie?" bars Harry woedend uit. "Wat maak hy hier onder?"

"Hy wou by die hofsaal probeer insluip, as jy my vra," sê meneer Weasley, wat baie ontsteld lyk en oor sy skouer loer asof hy wil seker maak dat niemand hulle probeer af luister nie. "Wou natuurlik uitvind of jy geskors is of nie. Ek sal 'n nota vir Dompeldorius laat wanneer ek jou gaan aflaai. Hy moet weet dat Malfoy weer met Broddelwerk gepraat het."

"Watter privaat sake het hulle nogal?"

"Goud, sou ek dink," sê meneer Weasley vererg. "Malfoy gee al jare lank ruimskoots vir allerhande goed. . . . kry hom in by die regte mense. . . . dan kan hy gunste vra. . . . wette waarvan hy nie hou nie, vertraag. . . . o, Lucius Malfoy het baie goeie kontakte."

Die hysbakdeure skuif oop. Dis leeg, behalwe 'n swerm memo's wat om meneer Weasley se kop fladder en waarna hy ergerlik waai voor hy die knoppie vir die Atrium druk. Die deure gaan toe.

"Meneer Weasley," sê Harry stadig, "as Broddelwerk Doodseters soos Malfoy ontmoet, as hy hulle alleen sien, hoe weet ons hulle het nie die Imperius-vloek op hom gesit nie?"

"Ons het al daaraan gedink, Harry," sê meneer Weasley sag. "Maar Dompeldorius reken Broddelwerk tree op die oomblik alleen op – wat, soos Dompeldorius tereg sê, nie 'n troos is nie. Dis beter om nie nou hieroor te praat nie, Harry."

Die deure gly oop en hulle stap uit in die Atrium, wat nou feitlik verlate is. Eric die wagtowenaar is weer agter sy *Daaglikse Profeet* versteek. Hulle is al verby die goue fontein toe Harry onthou.

“Wag . . .” sê hy vir meneer Weasley, haal sy geldsakkie uit en gaan terug na die fontein.

Hy kyk op in die aantreklike towenaarsgesig, wat van naby vir hom swak en effens dommerig lyk. Die heks het ’n strak glimlag asof sy aan ’n skoonheidswedstryd deelneem en Harry weet van geen gnome en sentours wat só dweperig na ’n mens sal staar nie. Net die huiself se kruiperige slaafsheid lyk oortuigend. Harry grinnik by die gedagte aan wat Hermien oor die standbeeld van die elf sou sê, dop sy geldsakkie om en gooi nie net tien Galjoene nie, maar die hele inhoud in die poel.

“Ek het dit geweet!” gil Ron en slaan die lug. “Jy kom altyd met alles weg!”

“Hulle moes jou vryspreek,” sê Hermien. Sy was amper flou van angs toe Harry die kombuis binnekom en hou nog steeds ’n beweerige hand voor haar gesig. “Daar was geen saak teen jou nie, hoege-naamd niks.”

“Julle lyk baie verlig vir mense wat so seker was dat ek sal loskom,” sê Harry met ’n glimlag.

Mevrou Weasley vee haar gesig aan haar voorskoot af en Fred, George en Ginny doen ’n soort oorlogsdans op die maat van ’n kreet wat klink soos: “*Hy’s vry, hy’s vry, hy’s vry* . . .”

“Dis genoeg! Bly stil!” skree meneer Weasley, hoewel hy ook glimlag. “Luister, Sirius, Lucius Malfoy was by die Ministerie –”

“Wat?” sê Sirius skerp.

“*Hy’s vry, hy’s vry, hy’s vry* . . .”

“Bly nou stil, julle drie! Ja, ons het hom met Broddelwerk op Vlak 9 sien praat. Toe is hulle saam op na Broddelwerk se kantoor. Dompeldorius behoort hiervan te weet.”

“Absoluut,” sê Sirius. “Ons sal vir hom sê, moenie worrie nie.”

“Wel, ek moet weg wees, daar wag ’n terugkerende toilet in Bethnal Green. Molly, ek gaan laat wees, ek neem vir Tonks waar, maar Kingsley val dalk vir aandete hier in –”

“*Hy’s vry, hy’s vry, hy’s vry* . . .”

“Dis genoeg – Fred – George – Ginny!” sê mevrou Weasley toe meneer Weasley by die kombuis uitstap. “Harry, skat, kom sit en eet iets, jy’t skaars vanoggend iets vir ontbyt gehad.”

Ron en Hermien kom sit oorkant Harry. Hulle lyk baie meer ontspanne as toe hy die eerste keer by Grimmauldplein opgedaag

het en Harry voel van voor af duiselig van verligting, 'n gevoel wat effens deur sy ontmoeting met Lucius Malfoy gedemp is. Die troostelose huis is skielik warm en vriendelik en selfs Skepsel lyk minder lelik toe hy sy snoetneus by die kombuis insteek om te sien wie so raas.

"Met Dompeldorius aan jou kant was dit vir hulle onmoontlik om jou skuldig te bevind," sê Ron tevrede terwyl hy groot hompe kapokaartappel op hul borde skep.

"Ja, dit het alles verander," sê Harry. Hy voel dit sal baie ondankebaar en kinderagtig klink as hy nou sou sê: "Ek wens net hy't met my gepraat. Of selfs net na my gekyk."

Die oomblik toe hy dit dink, brand die litteken op sy voorkop skielik so erg dat hy sy hand daaroor klap.

"Wat's fout?" vra Hermien dadelik bekommerd.

"Litteken," mompel Harry. "Maar dis niks . . . dit gebeur die laaste tyd gereeld . . ."

Nie een van die ander het iets opgelet nie. Almal is besig om kos te skep en hulle in Harry se noue ontkoming te verlekker. Fred, George en Ginny sing nog steeds. Hermien lyk effens angstig, maar voor sy iets kan sê, sê Ron in sy skik: "Ek wed Dompeldorius gaan vanaand kom om dit saam met ons te vier."

"Ek dink nie hy sal kan nie, Ron," sê mevrou Weasley en sit 'n groot bak geroosterde hoender voor Harry neer. "Hy's op die oomblik verskriklik besig."

"Hy's vry! Hy's vry! Hy's vry!"

"BLY STIL!" brul mevrou Weasley.

In die loop van die volgende paar dae kom Harry agter daar is iemand in Grimmauldplein 12 wat nie in die wolke is oor hy teruggaan Hogwarts toe nie. Toe hy eers die nuus gehoor het, het Sirius nes al die ander Harry se hand opgewonde geskud en gemaak of hy bly is. Kort daarna word hy egter nog buieriger en norser as tevore, praat nog minder met almal, ook met Harry, en sluit hom vir langer tye in sy ma se kamer by Bokbok toe.

"Moet jy nie staan en skuldig voel nie!" sê Hermien kwaai toe Harry 'n paar dae later vir haar en Ron vertel hoe hy voel terwyl hulle 'n gemufte kas op die derde verdieping uitskrop. "Jy hoort in Hogwarts en Sirius weet dit. Persoonlik dink ek hy is selfsugtig."

"Dis 'n bietjie kras, Hermien," sê Ron fronsend. Hy probeer 'n stuk muf afkrap wat aan sy vinger kleef. "Jy sal nie daarvan hou om sonder enige geselskap in hierdie huis te sit nie."

"Hy het geselskap!" sê Hermien. "Dis tog die Hoofkwartier van

die Orde van die Feniks! Hy't begin dink dat Harry hier by hom gaan kom bly."

"Ek dink nie dis waar nie," sê Harry en droog sy lap uit. "Hy wou nie 'n reguit antwoord gee toe ek hom gevra het of ek sal mag nie."

"Hy was bang hy word teleurgestel," sê Hermien wys. "En ek is eker hy't 'n bietjie skuldig gevoel omdat 'n deel van hom regtig begin hoop het jy word geskors. Dan kon julle twee uitgeworpenes saam hier bly."

"Moenie simpel wees nie!" sê Harry en Ron gelyk, maar Hermien laat haar skouers op.

"Nes julle wil. Maar soms dink ek Ron se ma is reg. Sirius verwar jou met jou pa, Harry."

"Dan dink jy hy's getik in sy kop?" sê Harry ergerlik.

"Nee, ek dink net hy was vir 'n lang tyd baie alleen," sê Hermien eenvoudig.

Mevrou Weasley kom die slaapkamer binne. "Nog nie klaar nie?" sê sy en druk haar kop in die kas.

"Ek dag Ma't vir ons kom sê ons kan 'n slaggie rus!" sê Ron bitter. "Weet Ma hoeveel muf ons al afgewas het vandat ons hier is?"

"Julle was dan so gretig om die Orde te help," sê mevrou Weasley. "Doen nou jul deel en maak die Hoofkwartier geskik vir mense om in te woon."

"Ek voel soos 'n huiself," brom Ron.

"Wel, nou weet jy hoe aaklig hul lewe is en dalk sal jy nou meer betrokke by SPOEG wees!" sê Hermien hoopvol toe mevrou Weasley uitstap. "Weet julle, dis dalk 'n goeie idee om vir mense te wys hoe aaklig dit is om die hele tyd skoon te maak – ons kan 'n geborgde skrop van die Griffindor-geselskamer reël. Die opbrengs sal na SPOEG gaan. Dit sal bewustheid bevorder en fondse insamel."

"Ek sal jou borg om jou mond oor SPOEG te hou," brom Ron ergerlik sodat net Harry hom kan hoor.

Harry kom agter dat hy al hoe meer oor Hogwarts dagdroom hoe nader die einde van die vakansie kom. Hy kan nie wag om weer vir Hagrid te sien, Kwiddiek te speel en selfs deur die groentetuine na die Herbologie-kweekhuise te stap nie. Dit sal 'n verligting wees om uit hierdie stowwerige, gemufte huis te kom waar die helfte van die kaste nog steeds toeges kroef is en Skepsel beledigings uit die skadu's na jou slinger. Harry sorg egter dat hy niks hiervan binne hoorafstand van Sirius sê nie.

Die feit is, dis nie naastenby so opwindend of interessant by die Hoofkwartier van die anti-Woldemort-beweging as wat Harry sou

gedink het as hy dit nie self beleef het nie. Hoewel lede van die Orde van die Feniks gedurig kom en gaan en soms vir ete bly, of minstens vir 'n paar minute se fluistergesprekke, maak mevrou Weasley seker dat Harry-hulle behoorlik buite hoorafstand is (met of sonder Verlengbare Ore) en dit lyk of niemand, nie eens Sirius, reken dat Harry meer moet weet as wat hy op die nag van sy aankoms gehoor het nie.

Op die laaste dag van die vakansie is Harry besig om Hedwig se mis bo van die kas af te vee toe Ron met 'n paar koeverte by hul slaapkamer instap.

“Boeklyste het gekom,” sê hy en gooi een van die koeverte op na waar Harry op 'n stoel staan. “Hoog tyd, ek het gedink hulle het vergeet, dit kom gewoonlik baie vroeër as dit . . .”

Harry vee die laaste bietjie mis in 'n vullissak en slinger die sak oor Ron se kop na die snippermandjie in die hoek, wat dit insluk en 'n harde wind opbreek. Dan maak hy sy brief oop. Daar is twee velle perkament: een is die standaardbrief wat hom daaraan herinner dat die kwartaal op die eerste September begin, die ander een sê watter boeke hy vir die nuwe jaar moet hê.

“Net twee nuwes,” sê hy terwyl hy die lys lees, “*Die Standaard-handleiding vir Goelery* (Graad 5), deur Miranda Singvalk, en *Die Teorie van die Verdedigingstoorkuns*, deur Wilbert Sluiphard.”

Klap.

Fred en George appearance reg langs Harry. Teen hierdie tyd is hy so gewoond daaraan dat hy nie eens van sy stoel afval nie.

“Ons het gewonder wie die Sluiphard-boek voorgeskryf het,” sê Fred gesellig.

“Want dit beteken Dompeldorius het 'n nuwe Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-onderwyser gekry,” sê George.

“Hoog tyd ook,” sê Fred.

“Wat bedoel julle?” vra Harry en spring van die stoel af.

“Wel, ons het vir Ma en Pa 'n paar weke gelede oor die Verlengbare Ore hoor praat,” sê Fred, “en volgens hulle het Dompeldorius omtrent gesukkel om vanjaar iemand te kry om die jop te doen.”

“Nie verbasend nie, hê, as jy kyk wat met die laaste vier gebeur het,” sê George.

“Een uitgeskop, een dood, een se geheue uitgewis en een vir nege maande toegesluit in 'n trommel,” sê Harry en tel hulle op sy vingers af. “Hm, ek sien wat jy bedoel.”

“Wat gaan met jou aan, Ron?” vra Fred.

Ron antwoord nie. Harry kyk om. Ron staan baie stil met sy mond effens oop. Hy gaap sy Hogwarts-brief aan.

"Wat's fout?" sê Fred ongeduldig. Hy stap na Ron en kyk oor sy skouer na die perkament.

Fred se mond val ook oop.

"Prefek?" sê hy en staar ongelowig na die brief. "Prefek?"

George spring vorentoe, gryp die koevert uit Ron se ander hand en dop dit om. Harry sien hoe iets wat rooi en goud flits in George se handpalm val.

"Kan nie wees nie," sê George in 'n gesmoorde stem.

"Dit moet 'n fout wees," sê Fred. Hy pluk die brief uit Ron se greep en hou dit teen die lig asof hy 'n watermerk soek. "Niemand by hul volle verstand sal vir Ron prefek maak nie."

Die tweeling kyk gelyk na Harry.

"Ons dog jy sou wees!" sê Fred in 'n stem wat Harry laat voel dat hy hulle op die een of ander manier verneuk het.

"Ons dog Dompeldorius sou jou vir seker kies!" sê George verontwaardig.

"Jy't die Drietowenaars gewen en alles!" sê Fred.

"Ek dink al daai mal goed het teen hom getel," sê George vir Fred.

"Ja," sê Fred stadig. "Ja, jy't te veel moles gemaak, my ou. Wel, ten minste is een van ons se prioriteite nog reg."

Hy stap na Harry, slaan hom op die rug en kyk vernietigend na Ron.

"Prefek . . . klein Ronnie die Prefek."

"Ooo, Ma gaan walglik wees," kreun George en gee die prefek-kenteken vir Ron terug asof hy bang is dit gaan hom besmet.

Ron, wat nog steeds nie 'n woord gesê het nie, neem die kenteken, staar 'n oomblik daarna en hou dit voor Harry asof hy wil hê Harry moet sê dit is eg. Harry vat dit by hom. 'n Groot "P" is oor die Griffindor-leeu gedruk. Op sy heel eerste dag by Hogwarts het Percy net so 'n kenteken teen sy bors gedra.

Die deur word oopgestamp en Hermien storm die kamer binne. Haar wange is bloesend en haar hare wapper. Daar's 'n koevert in haar hand.

"Het jy – het jy ook –?"

Sy sien die kenteken in Harry se hand en los 'n kreet.

"Ek het geweet!" sê sy opgewonde en waai haar brief deur die lug. "Ek ook, Harry, ek ook!"

"Nee," sê Harry vinnig en druk die kenteken terug in Ron se hand. "Dis Ron, nie ek nie."

"Dis – wat?"

"Ron is prefek, nie ek nie," sê Harry.

"Ron?" sê Hermien en haar mond val oop. "Maar . . . is jy seker? Ek bedoel –"

Sy word rooi toe Ron met 'n uitdagende uitdrukking op sy gesig na haar staar.

"My naam staan op die brief," sê hy.

"Ek . . ." sê Hermien. Sy lyk totaal verward. "Ek . . . wel . . . sjoel! Mooi so, Ron! Dis regtig –"

"Onverwags." George knik.

"Nee," sê Hermien en sy bloos nog rooier, "nee, dis nie – Ron het baie gedoen – hy's regtig . . ."

Die deur agter haar gaan groter oop en mevrou Weasley kom rug eerste in met 'n stapel pas gestrykte klede.

"Ginny sê die boeklyste het uiteindelik gekom," sê sy en kyk na al die koeverte terwyl sy na die beddens stap. Sy begin die mantels in twee stapels verdeel. "As julle dit vir my gee, kan ek vanmiddag na Diagonaalstraat gaan en julle boeke kry terwyl julle inpak. Ron, ek sal vir jou nuwe pajamas moet koop, hierdie is ten minste tien sentimeter te kort, ek kan nie glo hoe vinnig jy groei nie . . . Water kleur wil jy graag hê?"

"Kry vir hom rooi en goud om by sy kenteken te pas," sê George met 'n gynslag.

"Om by wat te pas?" sê mevrou Weasley verstrooid terwyl sy 'n paar maroen sokkies oprol en op Ron se hopie sit.

"Sy kenteken," sê Fred soos een wat die ergste so gou moontlik agter die rug wil kry. "Sy lieflike, skitterende, nuwe *prefek*kenteken."

Dit neem 'n rukkie voor Fred se woorde deur mevrou Weasley se preokkupasie met pajamas dring.

"Sy . . . maar . . . Ron, is jy tog nie . . . ?"

Ron hou sy kenteken op.

Mevrou Weasley uiter 'n kreet net soos Hermien s'n.

"Ek glo dit nie! Ek glo dit nie! O, Ron, hoe wonderlik! 'n Prefek! Dis almal in die gesin!"

"Wat is ek en Fred dan? Bure?" sê George verontwaardig toe sy ma hom uit die pad stoot en haar arms om haar jongste seun slaan.

"Wag tot jou pa dit hoor! Ron, ek is só trots op jou, watter wonderlike nuus, jy's dalk hoofseun soos Bill en Percy, dis die eerste tree! O, wat 'n wonderlike ding om in die middel van al hierdie bekommernisse te gebeur, ek is so bly, o *Ronnie* –"

Fred en George maak harde braakgeluide agter haar rug, maar mevrou Weasley merk niks. Haar arms is styf om Ron se nek geslaan en sy soen hom oor sy hele gesig, wat nou rooier as sy kenteken is.

“Ma . . . moenie . . . Ma, hou op . . .” mompel hy en probeer haar wegstoot.

Sy laat hom gaan en sê uitasem: “Wel, wat sal dit wees? Ons het vir Percy ’n uil gegee, maar jy’t natuurlik reeds een.”

“W-wat bedoel Ma?” sê Ron, wat lyk of hy sy ore nie kan glo nie.

“Jy moet hiervoor beloon word!” sê mevrou Weasley trots. “Wat van ’n nuwe stel aandklede?”

“Ons het klaar vir hom ’n paar gekoop,” sê Fred suur. Dit lyk asof hy baie spyt is oor dié vrygewigheid.

“Of ’n nuwe hekseketel; Charlie se oue is besig om deur te roes. Of ’n nuwe rot, jy’t altyd van Skille gehou –”

“Ma,” sê Ron hoopvol, “kan ek ’n nuwe besem kry?”

Mevrou Weasley se gesig val effens. Besems is duur.

“Nie so ’n vreeslike goeie een nie!” voeg Ron vinnig by. “Net – net ’n nuwe een, vir ’n verandering . . .”

Mevrou Weasley aarsel. Dan glimlag sy.

“Natuurlik kan jy . . . Wel, ek moet gaan as ek nog ’n besem ook moet koop. Ek sien julle later. . . klein Ronnie, ’n prefek! En moenie vergeet om jul trommels te pak nie. . . ’n prefek . . . o, ek bewe glad!”

Sy plant nog ’n soen op Ron se wang, snuif hard en draf by die deur uit.

Fred en George verwissel blikke.

“Jy gee nie om dat ons jou nie soen nie, nè, Ron?” sê Fred gemaak benoud.

“Ons kan kniebuig as jy wil,” sê George.

“Sharrap,” sê Ron en frons vir hulle.

“Of wat?” sê Fred en ’n duiwelse glimlag vertrek sy gesig. “Gaan jy vir ons detensie gee?”

“Ek sal hom graag sien probeer,” giggel George.

“Hy kan as julle nie oppas nie!” sê Hermien kwaai.

Fred en George bars uit van die lag en Ron prewel: “Bly stil, Hermien.”

“Ons sal in ons spore moet trap, George,” sê Fred en maak of hy bewe. “Met hierdie twee op ons spoor . . .”

“Ja, nou’s ons rampokkerdae getel.” George skud sy kop. En met ’n harde klapgeluid disappareer hulle.

“Daardie twee!” sê Hermien ergerlik en staar na die plafon waardeur hulle kan hoor hoe Fred en George in die boonste kamer brul van die lag. “Moet jou nie aan hulle steur nie, Ron, hulle is net jaloers!”

“Ek dink nie hulle is nie,” sê Ron onseker. Hy kyk ook na die plafon. “Hulle sê nog altyd net nerds word prefekte . . . maar,” voeg

hy op 'n vroliker noot by, "hulle het nooit nuwe besems gekry nie! Ek wens ek kon saam met Ma gaan en een kies . . . Sy sal nie 'n Nimbus kan bekostig nie, maar daar't 'n nuwe Wegveeg uitgekom, dit sal wonderlik wees . . . Hm, ek dink ek gaan gou vir haar sê ek wil die Wegveeg hê, net sodat sy weet . . ."

Hy storm uit die kamer en laat vir Harry en Hermien alleen.

Om die een of ander rede kan Harry nie na Hermien kyk nie. Hy draai na sy bed, tel die stapel skoon klede wat mevrou Weasley daarop neergesit het op en stap na sy trommel.

"Harry?" sê Hermien huiwerig.

"Baie geluk, Hermien," sê Harry so hartlik dat dit glad nie na sy eie stem klink nie. Hy kyk steeds nie na haar nie. "Briljant. Prefek. Skote."

"Dankie," sê Hermien. "Hm – Harry – kan ek vir Hedwig leen sodat ek my ma en pa kan laat weet? Hulle sal baie bly wees – ek bedoel, *prefek* is darem iets wat hulle verstaan."

"Ja, enige tyd," sê Harry, nog steeds in die aaklig hartlike stem wat glad nie by hom pas nie. "Vat haar!"

Hy buk oor sy trommel, sit die mantels op die bodem neer en maak of hy iets soek terwyl Hermien na die hangkas stap en vir Hedwig roep. 'n Paar oomblikke gaan verby; Harry hoor hoe die deur toegaan, maar hy staan gebukkend en luister. Hy luister hoe die lee portret teen die muur giggel terwyl die snippermandjie in die hoek die uilmis ophoes.

Hy kom orent en kyk om. Hermien is uit en Hedwig is weg. Hy gaan sit op sy bed en staar na die voet van die hangkas sonder om iets te sien.

Hy het skoon vergeet dat daar prefekte in die vyfde jaar gekies word. Hy was so benoud oor sy moontlike skorsing dat hy glad nie aan die kentekens gedink het wat teen hierdie tyd al op pad na sekere mense moet gewees het nie. Maar as hy onthou het . . . as hy daaraan gedink het . . . wat sou hy verwag het?

Nie dit nie, sê 'n klein, eerlike stemmetjie in sy kop.

Harry se gesig vertrek en hy laat sak sy kop in sy hande. Hy kan nie vir homself lieg nie. As hy geweet het die prefekkenteken is op pad, sou hy verwag het dis vir hom en nie vir Ron nie. Maak dit hom net so verwaand soos Draco Malfoy? Dink hy hy is beter as al die ander? Dink hy regtig hy is beter as Ron?

Nee, sê die klein stemmetjie uitdagend.

Is dit waar? wonder Harry en ondersoek sy eie gevoelens angstig.

Ek is beter met Kwiddiek, sê die stemmetjie. Maar ek's met niks anders beter nie.

Dis nogal waar, dink Harry. Hy vaar niks beter as Ron in die klas nie. Maar wat van buite die klaskamer? Wat van al die avonture wat hy, Ron en Hermien gehad het sedert hulle by Hogwarts begin het? Al die risiko's wat hulle al geloop het, wat dikwels baie groter as skorsing was?

Wel, Ron en Hermien was die meeste van die tyd saam met my, sê die stemmetjie in Harry se kop.

Nie die hele tyd nie, stry Harry met homself. Hulle het nie saam met my teen Quirrell geveg nie. Hulle het nie vir Dhoewels en die Basilisk aangedurf nie. Hulle het nie van die Dementors ontslae geraak die nag toe Sirius ontsnap het nie. Hulle was nie saam met my in daardie begraafplaas die nag toe Woldemort teruggekom het nie.

Dieselfde gevoel van misbruik wat hom op die nag van sy aankoms oorweldig het, wel weer in Harry op. Ek het baie meer as hulle gedoen, dink hy verontwaardig. Ek het meer as een en elk van hulle gedoen!

Maar miskien, sê die stemmetjie in alle redelikheid, miskien kies Dompeldorius juis nie prefekte wat hulle in gevaarlike situasies dompel nie. . . . dalk kies hy hulle om ander redes. . . . Ron moet iets hê wat jy nie het nie.

Harry maak sy oë oop, staar deur sy vingers na die hangkas se kloupote en onthou Fred se woorde: "Niemand by sy volle verstand sal vir Ron prefek maak nie."

Harry snork van die lag. Die volgende oomblik kan hy homself skop.

Ron het nie vir Dompeldorius gevra om die prefek kenteken vir hom te gee nie. Dis nie Ron se skuld nie. Gaan hy, Ron se beste vriend in die hele wêreld, dikbek wees omdat hy nie 'n kenteken gekry het nie? Gaan hy saam met die tweeling agter Ron se rug lag en alles vir Ron bederf net omdat Ron hom vir die eerste keer uitgestof het?

Op hierdie oomblik hoor Harry Ron se voetstappe op die trappe. Hy staan op, druk sy bril reg en plak 'n glimlag op sy gesig toe Ron die kamer binnestorm.

"Ek het haar net-net gevang!" sê hy in sy noppies. "Sy sê sy sal 'n Wegveeg kry as sy kan."

"Cool," sê Harry, verlig om te hoor dat sy stem nie meer so gemaak hartlik klink nie. "Luister – Ron – geluk, ou pël."

Die glimlag verdwyn van Ron se gesig.

"Ek het nooit gedink dit sal ek wees nie!" sê hy en skud sy kop. "Ek het gedink dit sal jy wees!"

“Nee, ek maak te veel moles,” eggo Harry vir Fred.

“Hm,” sê Ron, “ja, is seker so . . . Wel, ons moet seker ons trommels pak, nê?”

Dis snaaks hoe hul besittings sedert hul aankoms versprei geraak het. Dit neem die grootste deel van die middag om hul boeke en goed oral in die huis bymekaar te maak en in hul skooltrommels te pak. Harry sien dat Ron sy prefek kenteken gedurig rondbeweeg eers op sy bedkassie, toe in sy jeans se sak, toe haal hy dit uit en sit dit op sy gevoude kleed asof hy wil sien hoe die rooi teen die swart lyk. Eers toe Fred en George inkom en vra of hulle dit met 'n Permanente Kleeftowerspreuk teen sy voorkop mag vasplak, rol hy dit versigtig in sy maroen sokkies op en sluit dit in sy trommel toe.

Mevrou Weasley kom eers teen sesuur terug uit Diagonaalstraat, belaaï met boeke en 'n lang pakkie toegedraai in dik bruinpapier wat Ron met 'n kreun van verlange by haar neem.

“Moenie dit nou oopmaak nie, die mense begin opdaag vir aandete en ek wil hê julle moet almal ondertoe kom,” sê sy. Maar die oomblik toe sy uit sig is, ruk Ron die papier af en bestudeer elke sentimeter van sy nuwe besem met 'n ekstatiese uitdrukking op sy gesig.

Onder in die kelder het mevrou Weasley 'n skarlakenrooi banier oor die swaar gelaaide etenstafel gehang, waarop staan:

BAIE GELUK
RON EN HERMIEN
NUWE PREFEKTE

Sy is duidelik in 'n baie beter luim as wat Harry haar nog ooit die vakansie gesien het.

“Ek het gedink ons hou 'n bietjie partytjie, nie 'n aansitete nie,” sê sy vir Harry, Ron, Hermien, Fred, George en Ginny toe hulle die vertrek binnekom. “Jou pa en Bill is op pad, Ron. Ek het uile vir hulle albei gestuur en hulle is omtrent in hul noppies,” voeg sy stralend by. Fred rol sy oë.

Sirius, Lupin, Tonks en Kingsley Shacklebolt is reeds daar en Maloog Moodie hink binne kort ná Harry vir homself 'n Botterbier gaan haal het.

“A, Alastor, ek is bly jy's hier,” sê mevrou Weasley opgewek toe Maloog sy reismantel afgooi. “Ons wil al lankal vir jou vra – kan jy kyk wat in daardie lessenaar in die sitkamer is? Ons wou dit nie oopmaak nie, ingeval dit iets aakligs is.”

“Sekerlik, Molly.” Moodie se elektriesblou oog swaai boontoe en staar stip deur die kombuis se plafon.

"Sitkamer . . ." grom hy terwyl sy pupil vernou. "Lessenaar in die hoek? Ja, ek sien dit . . . ja, dis 'n Boggart . . . Wil jy hê ek moet voortoe gaan en daarvan ontslae raak, Molly?"

"Nee, nee, ek sal dit self later doen," sê mevrou Weasley verlig, "kry jy iets om te drink. Eintlik vier ons vanaand iets . . ." Sy wys na die skarlakenrooi banier. "Vierde prefek in die gesin!" sê sy trots en vryf Ron se hare deurmekaar.

"Prefek, hê?" grom Moodie, sy normale oog op Ron terwyl sy toweroog na die kant van sy kop draai. Harry kry die ongemaklike gevoel dat dit na hom kyk en stap vinnig weg na waar Sirius en Lupin staan.

"Wel, geluk," sê Moodie, wat nog steeds met sy normale oog na Ron staar. "Gesagsfigure trek altyd moeilikheid aan, maar ek skat Dompeldorius reken jy kan die groter vloeke hanteer, anders sou hy jou nie aangestel het nie . . ."

Dit lyk of hierdie siening Ron glad nie so gelukkig laat voel nie, maar hy hoef nie te antwoord nie, want sy pa en oudste broer het opgedaag. Mevrou Weasley is in so 'n goeie bui dat sy nie eens kla omdat hulle vir Mundungus saamgebring het nie. Hy dra 'n lang oorjas wat met vreemde knoppe op snaakse plekke staan en weier om dit uit te trek en by Moodie se reismantel op te hang.

"Wel, ek sou sê 'n heildronk is in orde," sê meneer Weasley toe almal 'n drankie het. "Op Ron en Hermien, die nuwe Griffindor-prefekte!"

Ron en Hermien straal terwyl almal op hulle drink en hande klap.

"Ek was nooit 'n prefek nie," sê Tonks vrolik agter Harry toe almal na die tafel gaan om op te skep. Haar hare is tamatierooi en hang tot by haar middel. Sy lyk soos Ginny se ouer suster. "Die hoof van my huis het gesê ek kort sekere noodsaaklike eienskappe."

"Soos wat?" vra Ginny terwyl sy 'n gebakte aartappel inskep.

"Soos die vermoë om my te gedra," sê Tonks.

Ginny lag. Hermien lyk of sy nie weet of sy moet lag nie en kom tot 'n vergelyk deur 'n groot sluk Botterbier te vat en daaraan te stik.

"Wat van jou, Sirius?" vra Ginny. Sy slaan vir Hermien op die rug. Sirius, wat langs Harry staan, uiter sy gewone blaflap.

"Niemand sou my prefek gemaak het nie. Ek was heeltemal te gereeld in detensie saam met James Potter. Lupin was die goeie seun, hy't die kenteken gekry."

"Ek dink Dompeldorius het gehoop ek sal my beste maats 'n bietjie in toom hou," sê Lupin. "Ek hoef seker nie te sê dat ek hope-loos misluk het nie."

Harry voel skielik beter. Sy pa was ook nie 'n prefek nie. Skielik is die partytjie baie lekkerder. Hy stapel sy bord hoog op en hou meteens dubbeld soveel soos gewoonlik van almal in die vertrek.

Ron wei ekstaties uit oor sy nuwe besem teenoor almal wat hoe-genaamd lyk of hulle sal luister.

“nul tot sewentig in tien sekondes, nie sleg nie, nè? As jy dink dat die Comet Twee Negentig net nul tot sestig kan doen, en volgens *Watter Besemstok?* is dit met 'n ordentlike wind van agter.”

Hermien is in druk gesprek met Lupin oor haar siening van elf-regie.

“Ek bedoel, dis tog dieselfde soort onsin as weerwolfsegregasie? Dit spruit alles uit hierdie aaklige manier van towenaars om te dink hulle is beter as ander wesens.”

Mevrou Weasley en Bill het hul gewone argument oor Bill se hare.

“dit ruk regtig handuit en jy is so aantreklik, dit sal baie beter lyk as dit kort is, nie waar nie, Harry?”

“O – ek weet nie –” sê Harry, wat glad nie bereid is om 'n opinie te lug nie. Hy glip weg na Fred en George wat in die hoek by Mundungus sit.

Mundungus hou op praat toe hy vir Harry sien, maar Fred knip-oog en wink vir Harry nader.

“Dis oukei,” sê hy vir Mundungus, “ons kan vir Harry vertrou, hy steun ons finansiëel.”

“Kyk wat het Dung vir ons gebring,” sê George en hou sy hand voor Harry. Dis vol goed wat soos gedroogde swart peule lyk. Hulle maak 'n dowwe ratelgeluid, hoewel hulle roerloos lê.

“Giftige Tentakula-sade,” sê George. “Ons het hulle vir die Stokkies-draaisnoepies nodig, maar hulle is 'n Klas C-nieverhandelbare stof en ons het 'n bietjie gesukkel om hulle in die hande te kry.”

“Tien Galjoene vir alles, hè, Dung?” vra Fred.

“Met al die moeite wat ek gehad het om dit te kry?” sê Mundungus en sy polfferige, bloedbelope oë rek selfs groter. “Ek is jammer, ouens, maar ek kan nie 'n Knoet minder as twintig aanvaar nie.”

“Dung hou van sy klein grappies,” sê Fred vir Harry.

“Ja, sy beste een tot dusver was ses Sekels vir 'n sakkie Knarl-veerpenne,” sê George.

“Oppas,” waarsku Harry saggies.

“Wat?” sê Fred. “Ma's besig om oor Prefek Ron te koer, ons is oukei.”

“Maar dalk hou Moodie julle in die oog,” verduidelik Harry.

Mundungus kyk senuagtig oor sy skouer.

“Goeie punt, Harry,” grom hy. “Goed dan, seuns, tien as julle gou maak.”

“Dankie, Harry!” knipoog Fred in sy skik nadat Mundungus sy sakke in die tweeling se uitgestrekte hande leeggemaak en na die kostafel beweeg het. “Ons neem dit gou boontoe . . .”

Harry voel onrustig terwyl hy hulle agternakyk. Dit het nogmaals by hom opgekom dat meneer en mevrou Weasley sal wonder hoe Fred en George hul grapwinkel finansier indien hulle iets sou uitvind, en dit sal die een of ander tyd op die lappe kom. Toe hy sy Drietowenaarsprysgeld vir hulle gegee het, het dit glad nie so erg gevoel nie, maar wat as dit tot nog ’n familietwis en Percy-vervreemding lei? Sal mevrou Weasley nog voel Harry is so goed as haar seun as sy weet dis hy wat dit vir Fred en George moontlik gemaak het om ’n loopbaan te begin wat sy dink glad nie geskik is nie?

Harry staan nog net daar waar die tweeling hom gelos het, die skuldige gewig in sy maag sy enigste geselskap, toe hy sy naam hoor. Kingsley Shacklebolt se diep stem is selfs oor die geraas hoorbaar.

“ . . . hoekom Dompeldorius nie die Potter-seun prefek gemaak het nie?” sê Kingsley.

“Hy sal sy redes hê,” antwoord Lupin.

“Maar dit sou gewys het dat hy in hom glo. Dis wat ek sou gedoen het,” dring Kingsley aan. “Veral met die *Daaglikse Profeet* wat hom elke nou en dan ’n stekie gee . . .”

Harry kyk nie om nie. Hy wil nie hê Lupin of Kingsley moet weet hy het gehoor nie. Hoewel hy glad nie honger is nie, volg hy vir Mundungus na die tafel. Sy plesier aan die partytjie het net so vinnig weer verdamp en hy wens hy was bo in sy bed.

Maloog Moodie ruik aan ’n hoenderboudjie met sy stuk neus wat nog oor is. Daar is skynbaar nie ’n spoor van gif nie, want hy skeur ’n reep met sy tande af.

“ . . . die handvatsel is van Spaanse eikehout met antivloek-vernis en ingeboude vibrasiekontrolê . . . ” sê Ron vir Tonks.

Mevrou Weasley gaap groot.

“Wel, ek dink ek gaan met daardie Boggart afreken voor ek gaan slaap . . . Arthur, hierdie klomp moenie te laat opbly nie, hoor. Nag, almal.”

Sy stap uit die kombuis. Harry sit sy bord neer en wonder of hy haar boontoe kan volg sonder dat iemand hom sien.

“Is jy oukei, Potter?” grom Moodie.

“Ja, ek’s orraait,” lieg Harry.

Moodie neem ’n sluk uit sy heupfles, sy elektriesblou oog staar skuins na Harry.

“Kom hier, ek het iets wat jou dalk sal interesseer.” Hy haal ’n baie verweerde ou towenaarsfoto uit ’n binnesak in sy kleed.

“Oorspronklike Orde van die Feniks,” grom Moodie. “Het dit laas nag gekry toe ek my ekstra onsigbaarheidsmantel gesoek het nadat Podmore nie die ordentlikheid gehad het om my beste een terug te gee nie . . . het gedink mense sal dit dalk wil sien.”

Harry neem die foto. ’n Klein groepie mense, waarvan party vir hom waai en ander hul glase lig, kyk terug na hom.

“Daar’s ek,” sê Moodie onnodig en wys na homself. Die Moodie in die foto is onmiskenbaar hy, hoewel sy hare effens minder grys en sy neus nog heel is. “En daar’s Dompeldorius langs my, Dedalus Diggel aan die ander kant . . . dis Marlene McKinnon, sy’s vermoor twee weke nadat die foto geneem is, hulle het haar hele gesin uitgewis. Dis Frank en Alice Loggerenberg –”

Harry se maag, wat reeds nie lekker voel nie, trek saam toe hy na Alice Loggerenberg kyk. Hy ken haar ronde, vriendelike gesig baie goed, hoewel hy haar nog nooit ontmoet het nie. Sy lyk nes haar seun, Neville.

“Arme drommels,” grom Moodie. “Eerder die dood as wat met hulle gebeur het . . . en dis Emmeline Vance, jy’t haar ontmoet, en daar is Lupin natuurlik . . . Benjy Fenwick, hy’s ook dood, ons het net stukkies van hom gekry . . . skuif op daar,” voeg hy by en tik teen die foto. Die klein mensies skuifel eenkant toe en die mense wat gedeeltelik verberg was, beweeg tot voor.

“Dis Edgar Bones . . . broer van Amelia Bones, hulle het hom en sy familie ook gekry, hy was ’n wonderlike towenaar . . . Sturgis Podmore, genade, hy lyk jonk . . . Caradoc Dearborn, het ses maande later verdwyn, ons het sy liggaam nooit gekry nie. Hagrid, natuurlik, lyk nog nes altyd . . . Elphias Doge, jy’t hom ontmoet, ek het vergeet dat hy altyd daardie simpel hoed gedra het. George Prewett, dit het vyf Doodseters gekos om hom en sy broer Fabian dood te kry, hulle het soos helde baklei . . . skuif op, skuif op . . .”

Die klein mensies op die foto stamp en stoot aan mekaar en dié wat heel agter weggesteek was, verskyn op die voorgrond.

“Dis Dompeldorius se broer Aberforth, die enigste keer dat ek hom ooit ontmoet het, eienaardige vent . . . dis Dorcas Meadowes, Woldemort het haar persoonlik doodgemaak . . . Sirius, toe hy nog kort hare gehad het . . . en daar’s hulle, het gedink jy sal dit wil sien!”

Harry se hart slaan bollemakiesie. Sy ma en pa kyk stralend na hom. Hulle sit aan weerskante van ’n klein mannetjie met waterige oë wat Harry dadelik as Wurmstert herken, die een wat sy ouers se wegkruipplek aan Woldemort verraai en hul dood help veroorsaak het.

“Hm?” sê Moodie.

Harry kyk op in Moodie se gesig vol littekens en kraters. Hy kan sien Moodie reken dit moet vir hom 'n groot aardigheid wees.

“Ja,” sê Harry en hy probeer glimlag. “Hm . . . Luister, ek het nou net onthou, ek het nog nie klaar gepak . . .”

Hy bly die moeite gespaar om nog iets uit te dink toe Sirius op daardie oomblik sê: “Wat het jy daar, Maloog?” en Moodie na hom toe draai. Harry stap deur die kombuis en glip op met die trappe voor iemand hom dalk terugroep.

Hy weet nie hoekom dit so 'n skok was nie. Hy het tog al voorheen foto's van sy ouers gesien en hy het tog vir Wurmstert ontmoet . . . maar om hulle so onverwags te sien, terwyl hy dit die minste verwag . . . niemand sal daarvan hou nie, dink hy ergerlik.

En om hulle só te sien, omring deur gelukkige gesigte . . . Benjy Fenwick wat in stukkies gekry is en Gideon Prewett wat soos 'n held gesterf het en die Loggerenbergs wat gemartel is tot hulle mal geword het . . . almal wat vir ewig vrolik uit die foto waai sonder dat hulle weet dat hulle gedoem is . . . Wel, Moodie mag dink dis interessant, maar dit het hom ontstel.

Hy stap op sy tone met die trappe op, verby die opgestopte elfkoppe, bly om uiteindelik alleen te wees, maar toe hy by die eerste trapportaal kom, hoor hy geluide. Daar is iemand in die sitkamer wat huil.

“Hallo?” sê Harry.

Daar is geen antwoord nie, maar die snikke duur voort. Hy neem die oorblywende trappe twee-twee, stap deur die trapportaal en maak die sitkamerdeur oop.

Iemand sit inmekaaergekrimp teen die donker muur, haar towerstaf is in haar hand en haar liggaam ruk van die snikke. Uitgestrek op die stowwerige ou mat voor haar, in 'n poel maanlig, duidelik dood, lê Ron.

Al die lug verdwyn uit Harry se longe. Dit voel asof hy deur die vloer val. Sy brein is ysig koud. Ron – dood – nee, dit kan nie wees nie –

Maar wag 'n bietjie, *dit kan nie wees nie* – Ron is daar onder –

“Mevrou Weasley?” sê Harry skor.

“R – r – riddikulus!” snik mevrou Weasley en rig haar bewende towerstaf op Ron se liggaam.

Klap.

Ron se liggaam verander in Bill s'n, op die naat van sy rug, sy oë wyd oop en starend. Mevrou Weasley huil nog harder as voorheen.

“R – riddikulus!” snik sy weer.

Klap.

Meneer Weasley se liggaam vervang Bill s'n, sy bril hang skeef, 'n straaltjie bloed loop oor sy gesig.

"Nee!" kerm mevrou Weasley. "Nee . . . riddikulus! Riddikulus! RIDDIKULUS!"

Klap. Die tweeling, dood! Klap. Percy, dood! Klap. Harry, dood!

"Mevrou Weasley, gaan net uit!" skree Harry terwyl hy na sy eie dooie liggaam op die vloer staar. "Laat iemand anders –"

"Wat gaan aan?"

Lupin storm die vertrek binne, gevolg deur Sirius en Moodie wat agternahink. Lupin kyk van mevrou Weasley na die dooie Harry op die vloer en dis duidelik dat hy onmiddellik verstaan. Hy pluk sy towerstaf uit en sê hard en baie duidelik:

"Riddikulus!"

Harry se liggaam verdwyn. 'n Silwer bal hang in die lug bo die plek waar dit gelê het. Lupin waai sy towerstaf weer en die bal verdwyn in 'n warreling rook.

"O – o – o!" snik mevrou Weasley en bars uit in 'n stortvloed trane, haar gesig in haar hande.

"Molly," sê Lupin gewoonweg en stap nader. "Molly, moenie . . ."

Die volgende oomblik huil sy haar hart uit teen Lupin se skouer.

"Molly, dit was net 'n Boggart," troos hy en streel haar hare. "Net 'n simpel Boggart . . ."

"Ek sien hulle die hele tyd . . . d – d – dood!" kerm mevrou Weasley gesmoord. "Die hele t – t – tyd! Ek d – d – droom daarvan . . ."

Sirius staar na die plek op die mat waar die Boggart gelê het toe hy gemaak het of hy Harry se dooie liggaam is. Moodie kyk na Harry, wat sy blik vermy. Hy is seker Moodie se toweroog het hom al die pad uit die kombuis gevolg.

"M – m – moenie vir Arthur sê nie," sê mevrou Weasley en vee haar oë vinnig met haar moue af. "Ek w – w – wil nie h – h – hê hy moet weet . . . hoe simpel . . ."

Lupin gee vir haar 'n sakdoek en sy blaas haar neus.

"Harry, ek is baie jammer. Wat moet jy van my dink?" sê sy beweegrig. "Kan nie eens van 'n Boggart ontslae raak . . ."

"Moenie laf wees nie," sê Harry en probeer glimlag.

"Ek is net s – s – so bekommerd," sê sy terwyl trane weer oor haar wange rol. "Die helfte van die g – g – gesin is in die Orde, dit sal 'n wonderwerk wees as almal dit oorleef . . . en P – P – Percy praat nie met ons nie . . . wat as iets v – v – vreesliks gebeur en ons het nie eens met hom v – v – vrede gemaak nie? En wat gaan gebeur as

Arthur en ek vermoor word, wie g – g – gaan na Ron en Ginny kyk?”

“Molly, dis genoeg,” sê Lupin ferm. “Dis nie soos die vorige keer nie. Die Orde is beter voorberei, ons het ’n voorsprong, ons weet wat Woldemort beoog –”

Mevrou Weasley gee ’n verskrikte gillettjie toe sy die naam hoor.

“O, Molly, komaan, dis tyd dat jy aan sy naam gewoon raak! Kyk, ek kan nie belooft dat niemand gaan seerkry nie, niemand kan dit belooft nie, maar ons is baie beter daaraan toe as die vorige keer. Jy was nie toe in die Orde nie, jy sal nie verstaan nie. Die vorige keer was ons twintig teen een teen die Doodseters en hulle het ons een vir een afgemaai . . .”

Harry dink weer aan die foto van sy ouers se stralende gesigte. Hy weet Moodie hou hom nog steeds dop.

“Moet jou nie oor Percy bekommer nie,” sê Sirius onverwags. “Hy sal regkom. Dis net ’n kwessie van tyd voor Woldemort openlik begin optree en dan sal die hele Ministerie ons smeek om hulle te vergewe. En ek is glad nie seker ek gaan hul apologie aanvaar nie,” voeg hy bitter by.

“En wat Ron en Ginny betref as jy en Arthur sou doodgaan,” sê Lupin en hy glimlag effens, “wat dink jy, dat ons hulle sal laat verhonger?”

Mevrou Weasley glimlag bewerig.

“Ek is regtig verspot,” sê sy en vee haar oë af.

Maar toe Harry sy kamerdeur ongeveer tien minute later agter hom toemaak, dink hy nie mevrou Weasley is verspot nie. Hy kan sy stralende ouers nog uit die verweerde foto sien kyk, onbewus daarvan dat hul lewe, soos so baie om hulle s’n, feitlik verby is. Die beeld van die Boggart wat maak of hy om die beurt die dooie liggaam van elke lid van mevrou Weasley se gesin is, flits aanhoudend voor sy oë.

Sonder waarskuwing brand die litteken op sy voorkop skielik erg en sy maag begin kramp.

“Hou op,” sê hy beslis en vryf sy litteken tot die pyn bedaar het.

“Die eerste teken van malheid – as jy met jou eie kop praat,” sê ’n skelm stem. Dis die leë portret teen die muur.

Harry ignoreer dit. Hy voel ouer as wat hy nog ooit gevoel het en hy kan amper nie glo dat hy hom minder as ’n uur gelede oor ’n grapwinkel en ’n prefek kenteken bekommer het nie.

CHAPTER TEN



LUNA LOVEGOOD

Harry had a troubled night's sleep. His parents wove in and out of his dreams, never speaking; Mrs. Weasley sobbed over Kreacher's dead body watched by Ron and Hermione, who were wearing crowns, and yet again Harry found himself walking down a corridor ending in a locked door. He awoke abruptly with his scar prickling to find Ron already dressed and talking to him.

" . . . better hurry up, Mum's going ballistic, she says we're going to miss the train . . . "

There was a lot of commotion in the house. From what he heard as he dressed at top speed, Harry gathered that Fred and George had

bewitched their trunks to fly downstairs to save the bother of carrying them, with the result that they had hurtled straight into Ginny and knocked her down two flights of stairs into the hall; Mrs. Black and Mrs. Weasley were both screaming at the top of their voices:

“— COULD HAVE DONE HER A SERIOUS INJURY, YOU IDIOTS —”

“— FILTHY HALF-BREEDS, BESMIRCHING THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS —”

Hermione came hurrying into the room looking flustered just as Harry was putting on his trainers; Hedwig was swaying on her shoulder, and she was carrying a squirming Crookshanks in her arms.

“Mum and Dad just sent Hedwig back” — the owl fluttered obligingly over and perched on top of her cage — “are you ready yet?”

“Nearly — Ginny all right?” Harry asked, shoving on his glasses.

“Mrs. Weasley’s patched her up,” said Hermione. “But now Mad-Eye’s complaining that we can’t leave unless Sturgis Podmore’s here, otherwise the guard will be one short.”

“Guard?” said Harry. “We have to go to King’s Cross with a guard?”

“*You* have to go to King’s Cross with a guard,” Hermione corrected him.

“Why?” said Harry irritably. “I thought Voldemort was supposed to be lying low, or are you telling me he’s going to jump out from behind a dustbin to try and do me in?”

“I don’t know, it’s just what Mad-Eye says,” said Hermione distractedly, looking at her watch. “But if we don’t leave soon we’re

definitely going to miss the train . . .”

“WILL YOU LOT GET DOWN HERE NOW, PLEASE!” Mrs. Weasley bellowed and Hermione jumped as though scalded and hurried out of the room. Harry seized Hedwig, stuffed her unceremoniously into her cage, and set off downstairs after Hermione, dragging his trunk.

Mrs. Black’s portrait was howling with rage but nobody was bothering to close the curtains over her; all the noise in the hall was bound to rouse her again anyway.

“Harry, you’re to come with me and Tonks,” shouted Mrs. Weasley over the repeated screeches of “*MUDBLOODS! SCUM! CREATURES OF DIRT!*” “Leave your trunk and your owl, Alastor’s going to deal with the luggage. . . . Oh, for heaven’s sake, Sirius, Dumbledore said no!”

A bearlike black dog had appeared at Harry’s side as Harry clambered over the various trunks cluttering the hall to get to Mrs. Weasley.

“Oh honestly . . .” said Mrs. Weasley despairingly, “well, on your own head be it!”

She wrenched open the front door and stepped out into the weak September sunlight. Harry and the dog followed her. The door slammed behind them and Mrs. Black’s screeches were cut off instantly.

“Where’s Tonks?” Harry said, looking around as they went down the stone steps of number twelve, which vanished the moment they reached the pavement.

“She’s waiting for us just up here,” said Mrs. Weasley stiffly,

averting her eyes from the lolloping black dog beside Harry.

An old woman greeted them on the corner. She had tightly curled gray hair and wore a purple hat shaped like a porkpie.

“Wotcher, Harry,” she said, winking. “Better hurry up, hadn’t we, Molly?” she added, checking her watch.

“I know, I know,” moaned Mrs. Weasley, lengthening her stride, “but Mad-Eye wanted to wait for Sturgis. . . . If only Arthur could have got us cars from the Ministry again . . . but Fudge wouldn’t let him borrow so much as an empty ink bottle these days. . . . *How* Muggles can stand traveling without magic . . .”

But the great black dog gave a joyful bark and gamboled around them, snapping at pigeons, and chasing its own tail. Harry couldn’t help laughing. Sirius had been trapped inside for a very long time. Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips in an almost Aunt Petunia-ish way.

It took them twenty minutes to reach King’s Cross by foot and nothing more eventful happened during that time than Sirius scaring a couple of cats for Harry’s entertainment. Once inside the station they lingered casually beside the barrier between platforms nine and ten until the coast was clear, then each of them leaned against it in turn and fell easily through onto platform nine and three quarters, where the Hogwarts Express stood belching sooty steam over a platform packed with departing students and their families. Harry inhaled the familiar smell and felt his spirits soar. . . . He was really going back. . . .

“I hope the others make it in time,” said Mrs. Weasley anxiously, staring behind her at the wrought-iron arch spanning the platform, through which new arrivals would come.

“Nice dog, Harry!” called a tall boy with dreadlocks.

“Thanks, Lee,” said Harry, grinning, as Sirius wagged his tail frantically.

“Oh good,” said Mrs. Weasley, sounding relieved, “here’s Alastor with the luggage, look . . .”

A porter’s cap pulled low over his mismatched eyes, Moody came limping through the archway pushing a cart full of their trunks.

“All okay,” he muttered to Mrs. Weasley and Tonks. “Don’t think we were followed . . .”

Seconds later, Mr. Weasley emerged onto the platform with Ron and Hermione. They had almost unloaded Moody’s luggage cart when Fred, George, and Ginny turned up with Lupin.

“No trouble?” growled Moody.

“Nothing,” said Lupin.

“I’ll still be reporting Sturgis to Dumbledore,” said Moody. “That’s the second time he’s not turned up in a week. Getting as unreliable as Mundungus.”

“Well, look after yourselves,” said Lupin, shaking hands all round. He reached Harry last and gave him a clap on the shoulder. “You too, Harry. Be careful.”

“Yeah, keep your head down and your eyes peeled,” said Moody, shaking Harry’s hand too. “And don’t forget, all of you — careful what you put in writing. If in doubt, don’t put it in a letter at all.”

“It’s been great meeting all of you,” said Tonks, hugging Hermione and Ginny. “We’ll see you soon, I expect.”

A warning whistle sounded; the students still on the platform started hurrying onto the train.

“Quick, quick,” said Mrs. Weasley distractedly, hugging them at random and catching Harry twice. “Write . . . Be good. . . . If you’ve forgotten anything we’ll send it on Onto the train, now, hurry”

For one brief moment, the great black dog reared onto its hind legs and placed its front paws on Harry’s shoulders, but Mrs. Weasley shoved Harry away toward the train door hissing, “For heaven’s sake act more like a dog, Sirius!”

“See you!” Harry called out of the open window as the train began to move, while Ron, Hermione, and Ginny waved beside him. The figures of Tonks, Lupin, Moody, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley shrank rapidly but the black dog was bounding alongside the window, wagging its tail; blurred people on the platform were laughing to see it chasing the train, and then they turned the corner, and Sirius was gone.

“He shouldn’t have come with us,” said Hermione in a worried voice.

“Oh lighten up,” said Ron, “he hasn’t seen daylight for months, poor bloke.”

“Well,” said Fred, clapping his hands together, “can’t stand around chatting all day, we’ve got business to discuss with Lee. See you later,” and he and George disappeared down the corridor to the right.

The train was gathering still more speed, so that the houses outside the window flashed past and they swayed where they stood.

“Shall we go and find a compartment, then?” Harry asked Ron and Hermione.

Ron and Hermione exchanged looks.

“Er,” said Ron.

“We’re — well — Ron and I are supposed to go into the prefect carriage,” Hermione said awkwardly.

Ron wasn’t looking at Harry; he seemed to have become intensely interested in the fingernails on his left hand.

“Oh,” said Harry. “Right. Fine.”

“I don’t think we’ll have to stay there all journey,” said Hermione quickly. “Our letters said we just get instructions from the Head Boy and Girl and then patrol the corridors from time to time.”

“Fine,” said Harry again. “Well, I-I might see you later, then.”

“Yeah, definitely,” said Ron, casting a shifty, anxious look at Harry. “It’s a pain having to go down there, I’d rather — but we have to — I mean, I’m not enjoying it, I’m not Percy,” he finished defiantly.

“I know you’re not,” said Harry and he grinned. But as Hermione and Ron dragged their trunks, Crookshanks, and a caged Pigwidgeon off toward the engine end of the train, Harry felt an odd sense of loss. He had never traveled on the Hogwarts Express without Ron.

“Come on,” Ginny told him, “if we get a move on we’ll be able to save them places.”

“Right,” said Harry, picking up Hedwig’s cage in one hand and the handle of his trunk in the other. They struggled off down the corridor, peering through the glass-paneled doors into the compartments they passed, which were already full. Harry could not help noticing that a lot of people stared back at him with great interest and that several of them nudged their neighbors and pointed him out. After he had met this behavior in five consecutive carriages he remembered that the

Daily Prophet had been telling its readers all summer what a lying show-off he was. He wondered bleakly whether the people now staring and whispering believed the stories.

In the very last carriage they met Neville Longbottom, Harry's fellow fifth-year Gryffindor, his round face shining with the effort of pulling his trunk along and maintaining a one-handed grip on his struggling toad, Trevor.

"Hi, Harry," he panted. "Hi, Ginny. . . . Everywhere's full. . . . I can't find a seat. . . ."

"What are you talking about?" said Ginny, who had squeezed past Neville to peer into the compartment behind him. "There's room in this one, there's only Loony Lovegood in here —"

Neville mumbled something about not wanting to disturb anyone.

"Don't be silly," said Ginny, laughing, "she's all right."

She slid the door open and pulled her trunk inside it. Harry and Neville followed.

"Hi, Luna," said Ginny. "Is it okay if we take these seats?"

The girl beside the window looked up. She had straggly, waist-length, dirty-blond hair, very pale eyebrows, and protuberant eyes that gave her a permanently surprised look. Harry knew at once why Neville had chosen to pass this compartment by. The girl gave off an aura of distinct dottiness. Perhaps it was the fact that she had stuck her wand behind her left ear for safekeeping, or that she had chosen to wear a necklace of butterbeer caps, or that she was reading a magazine upside down. Her eyes ranged over Neville and came to rest on Harry. She nodded.

"Thanks," said Ginny, smiling at her.

Harry and Neville stowed the three trunks and Hedwig's cage in the luggage rack and sat down. The girl called Luna watched them over her upside-down magazine, which was called *The Quibbler*. She did not seem to need to blink as much as normal humans. She stared and stared at Harry, who had taken the seat opposite her and now wished he had not.

"Had a good summer, Luna?" Ginny asked.

"Yes," said Luna dreamily, without taking her eyes off Harry. "Yes, it was quite enjoyable, you know. *You're* Harry Potter," she added.

"I know I am," said Harry.

Neville chuckled. Luna turned her pale eyes upon him instead.

"And I don't know who you are."

"I'm nobody," said Neville hurriedly.

"No you're not," said Ginny sharply. "Neville Longbottom — Luna Lovegood. Luna's in my year, but in Ravenclaw."

"*Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure,*" said Luna in a singsong voice.

She raised her upside-down magazine high enough to hide her face and fell silent. Harry and Neville looked at each other with their eyebrows raised. Ginny suppressed a giggle.

The train rattled onward, speeding them out into open country. It was an odd, unsettled sort of day; one moment the carriage was full of sunlight and the next they were passing beneath ominously gray clouds.

"Guess what I got for my birthday?" said Neville.

"Another Remembrall?" said Harry, remembering the marblelike device Neville's grandmother had sent him in an effort to improve his

abysmal memory.

“No,” said Neville, “I could do with one, though, I lost the old one ages ago. . . . No, look at this . . .”

He dug the hand that was not keeping a firm grip on Trevor into his schoolbag and after a little bit of rummaging pulled out what appeared to be a small gray cactus in a pot, except that it was covered with what looked like boils rather than spines.

“*Mimulus mimbletonia*,” he said proudly.

Harry stared at the thing. It was pulsating slightly, giving it the rather sinister look of some diseased internal organ.

“It’s really, really rare,” said Neville, beaming. “I don’t know if there’s one in the greenhouse at Hogwarts, even. I can’t wait to show it to Professor Sprout. My great-uncle Algie got it for me in Assyria. I’m going to see if I can breed from it.”

Harry knew that Neville’s favorite subject was Herbology, but for the life of him he could not see what he would want with this stunted little plant.

“Does it — er — do anything?” he asked.

“Loads of stuff!” said Neville proudly. “It’s got an amazing defensive mechanism — hold Trevor for me . . .”

He dumped the toad into Harry’s lap and took a quill from his schoolbag. Luna Lovegood’s popping eyes appeared over the top of her upside-down magazine again, watching what Neville was doing. Neville held the *Mimulus mimbletonia* up to his eyes, his tongue between his teeth, chose his spot, and gave the plant a sharp prod with the tip of his quill.

Liquid squirted from every boil on the plant, thick, stinking, dark-

green jets of it; they hit the ceiling, the windows, and spattered Luna Lovegood's magazine. Ginny, who had flung her arms up in front of her face just in time, merely looked as though she was wearing a slimy green hat, but Harry, whose hands had been busy preventing the escape of Trevor, received a face full. It smelled like rancid manure.

Neville, whose face and torso were also drenched, shook his head to get the worst out of his eyes.

"S-sorry," he gasped. "I haven't tried that before. . . . Didn't realize it would be quite so. . . . Don't worry, though, Stinksap's not poisonous," he added nervously, as Harry spat a mouthful onto the floor.

At that precise moment the door of their compartment slid open.

"Oh. . . hello, Harry," said a nervous voice. "Um. . . bad time?"

Harry wiped the lenses of his glasses with his Trevor-free hand. A very pretty girl with long, shiny black hair was standing in the doorway smiling at him: Cho Chang, the Seeker on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team.

"Oh. . . hi," said Harry blankly.

"Um. . . " said Cho. "Well. . . just thought I'd say hello. . . 'bye then."

She closed the door again, rather pink in the face, and departed. Harry slumped back in his seat and groaned. He would have liked Cho to discover him sitting with a group of very cool people laughing their heads off at a joke he had just told; he would not have chosen to be sitting with Neville and Loony Lovegood, clutching a toad and dripping in Stinksap.

"Never mind," said Ginny bracingly. "Look, we can get rid of all

this easily.” She pulled out her wand. “*Scourgify!*”

The Stinksap vanished.

“Sorry,” said Neville again, in a small voice.

Ron and Hermione did not turn up for nearly an hour, by which time the food trolley had already gone by. Harry, Ginny, and Neville had finished their Pumpkin Pasties and were busy swapping Chocolate Frog cards when the compartment door slid open and they walked in, accompanied by Crookshanks and a shrilly hooting Pigwidgeon in his cage.

“I’m starving,” said Ron, stowing Pigwidgeon next to Hedwig, grabbing a Chocolate Frog from Harry and throwing himself into the seat next to him. He ripped open the wrapper, bit off the Frog’s head, and leaned back with his eyes closed as though he had had a very exhausting morning.

“Well, there are two fifth-year prefects from each House,” said Hermione, looking thoroughly disgruntled as she took her seat. “Boy and girl from each.”

“And guess who’s a Slytherin prefect?” said Ron, still with his eyes closed.

“Malfoy,” replied Harry at once, his worst fear confirmed.

“Course,” said Ron bitterly, stuffing the rest of the Frog into his mouth and taking another.

“And that complete *cow* Pansy Parkinson,” said Hermione viciously. “How she got to be a prefect when she’s thicker than a concussed troll . . .”

“Who’s Hufflepuff?” Harry asked.

“Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott,” said Ron thickly.

“And Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil for Ravenclaw,” said Hermione.

“You went to the Yule Ball with Padma Patil,” said a vague voice.

Everyone turned to look at Luna Lovegood, who was gazing unblinkingly at Ron over the top of *The Quibbler*. He swallowed his mouthful of Frog.

“Yeah, I know I did,” he said, looking mildly surprised.

“She didn’t enjoy it very much,” Luna informed him. “She doesn’t think you treated her very well, because you wouldn’t dance with her. I don’t think I’d have minded,” she added thoughtfully, “I don’t like dancing very much.”

She retreated behind *The Quibbler* again. Ron stared at the cover with his mouth hanging open for a few seconds, then looked around at Ginny for some kind of explanation, but Ginny had stuffed her knuckles in her mouth to stop herself giggling. Ron shook his head, bemused, then checked his watch.

“We’re supposed to patrol the corridors every so often,” he told Harry and Neville, “and we can give out punishments if people are misbehaving. I can’t wait to get Crabbe and Goyle for something . . .”

“You’re not supposed to abuse your position, Ron!” said Hermione sharply.

“Yeah, right, because Malfoy won’t abuse it at all,” said Ron sarcastically.

“So you’re going to descend to his level?”

“No, I’m just going to make sure I get his mates before he gets mine.”

“For heaven’s sake, Ron —”

“I’ll make Goyle do lines, it’ll kill him, he hates writing,” said Ron happily. He lowered his voice to Goyle’s low grunt and, screwing up his face in a look of pained concentration, mimed writing in midair, “*I . . . must . . . not . . . look . . . like . . . a . . . baboon’s . . . backside . . .*”

Everyone laughed, but nobody laughed harder than Luna Lovegood. She let out a scream of mirth that caused Hedwig to wake up and flap her wings indignantly and Crookshanks to leap up into the luggage rack, hissing. She laughed so hard that her magazine slipped out of her grasp, slid down her legs, and onto the floor.

“That was *funny!*”

Her prominent eyes swam with tears as she gasped for breath, staring at Ron. Utterly nonplussed, he looked around at the others, who were now laughing at the expression on Ron’s face and at the ludicrously prolonged laughter of Luna Lovegood, who was rocking backward and forward, clutching her sides.

“Are you taking the mickey?” said Ron, frowning at her.

“Baboon’s . . . backside!” she choked, holding her ribs.

Everyone else was watching Luna laughing, but Harry, glancing at the magazine on the floor, noticed something that made him dive for it. Upside down it had been hard to tell what the picture on the front was, but Harry now realized it was a fairly bad cartoon of Cornelius Fudge; Harry only recognized him because of the lime-green bowler hat. One of Fudge’s hands was clenched around a bag of gold; the other hand was throttling a goblin. The cartoon was captioned: **HOW FAR WILL FUDGE GO TO GAIN GRINGOTTS?**

Beneath this were listed the titles of other articles inside the

magazine.

CORRUPTION IN THE QUIDDITCH LEAGUE: How the Tornados Are Taking Control

SECRETS OF THE ANCIENT RUNES REVEALED

SIRIUS BLACK: Villain or Victim?

“Can I have a look at this?” Harry asked Luna eagerly.

She nodded, still gazing at Ron, breathless with laughter.

Harry opened the magazine and scanned the index; until this moment he had completely forgotten the magazine Kingsley had handed Mr. Weasley to give to Sirius, but it must have been this edition of *The Quibbler*. He found the page and turned excitedly to the article.

This too was illustrated by a rather bad cartoon; in fact, Harry would not have known it was supposed to be Sirius if it hadn't been captioned. Sirius was standing on a pile of human bones with his wand out. The headline on the article read:

SIRIUS — Black As He's Painted?

Notorious Mass Murderer OR Innocent Singing Sensation?

Harry had to read this sentence several times before he was convinced that he had not misunderstood it. Since when had Sirius been a singing sensation?

For fourteen years, Sirius Black has been believed guilty of the mass murder of twelve innocent Muggles and one wizard. Black's audacious escape from Azkaban two years ago has led to the widest manhunt ever conducted by the Ministry of Magic. None of us has ever questioned that he deserves to be recaptured and handed back to the dementors.

BUT DOES HE?

Startling new evidence has recently come to light that Sirius Black may not have committed the crimes for which he was sent to Azkaban. In fact, says Doris Purkiss, of 18 Acanthia Way, Little Norton, Black may not even have been present at the killings.

"What people don't realize is that Sirius Black is a false name," says Mrs. Purkiss. "The man people believe to be Sirius Black is actually Stubby Boardman, lead singer of the popular singing group The Hobgoblins, who retired from public life after being struck in the ear by a turnip at a concert in Little Norton Church Hall nearly fifteen years ago. I recognized him the moment I saw his picture in the paper. Now, Stubby couldn't possibly have committed those crimes, because on the day in question he happened to be enjoying a romantic candlelit dinner with me. I have written to the Minister of Magic and am expecting him to give Stubby, alias Sirius, a full pardon any day now."

Harry finished reading and stared at the page in disbelief. Perhaps

it was a joke, he thought, perhaps the magazine often printed spoof items. He flicked back a few pages and found the piece on Fudge.

Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, denied that he had any plans to take over the running of the Wizarding bank, Gringotts, when he was elected Minister of Magic five years ago. Fudge has always insisted that he wants nothing more than to "cooperate peacefully" with the guardians of our gold.

BUT DOES HE?

Sources close to the Minister have recently disclosed that Fudge's dearest ambition is to seize control of the goblin gold supplies and that he will not hesitate to use force if need be.

"It wouldn't be the first time, either," said a Ministry insider. "Cornelius 'Goblin-Crusher' Fudge, that's what his friends call him, if you could hear him when he thinks no one's listening, oh, he's always talking about the goblins he's had done in; he's had them drowned, he's had them dropped off buildings, he's had them poisoned, he's had them cooked in pies . . ."

Harry did not read any further. Fudge might have many faults but Harry found it extremely hard to imagine him ordering goblins to be cooked in pies. He flicked through the rest of the magazine. Pausing every few pages he read an accusation that the Tutshill Tornados were winning the Quidditch League by a combination of blackmail, illegal broom-tampering, and torture; an interview with a wizard

who claimed to have flown to the moon on a Cleansweep. Six and brought back a bag of moon frogs to prove it; and an article on ancient runes, which at least explained why Luna had been reading *The Quibbler* upside down. According to the magazine, if you turned the runes on their heads they revealed a spell to make your enemy's ears turn into kumquats. In fact, compared to the rest of the articles in *The Quibbler*, the suggestion that Sirius might really be the lead singer of The Hobgoblins was quite sensible.

"Anything good in there?" asked Ron as Harry closed the magazine.

"Of course not," said Hermione scathingly, before Harry could answer, "*The Quibbler's* rubbish, everyone knows that."

"Excuse me," said Luna; her voice had suddenly lost its dreamy quality. "My father's the editor."

"I — oh," said Hermione, looking embarrassed. "Well . . . it's got some interesting . . . I mean, it's quite . . ."

"I'll have it back, thank you," said Luna coldly, and leaning forward she snatched it out of Harry's hands. Rifling through it to page fifty-seven, she turned it resolutely upside down again and disappeared behind it, just as the compartment door opened for the third time.

Harry looked around; he had expected this, but that did not make the sight of Draco Malfoy smirking at him from between his cronies Crabbe and Goyle any more enjoyable.

"What?" he said aggressively, before Malfoy could open his mouth.

"Manners, Potter, or I'll have to give you a detention," drawled

Malfoy, whose sleek blond hair and pointed chin were just like his father's. "You see, I, unlike you, have been made a prefect, which means that I, unlike you, have the power to hand out punishments."

"Yeah," said Harry, "but you, unlike me, are a git, so get out and leave us alone."

Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville laughed. Malfoy's lip curled.

"Tell me, how does it feel being second-best to Weasley, Potter?" he asked.

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Hermione sharply.

"I seem to have touched a nerve," said Malfoy, smirking. "Well, just watch yourself, Potter, because I'll be *dogging* your footsteps in case you step out of line."

"Get out!" said Hermione, standing up.

Sniggering, Malfoy gave Harry a last malicious look and departed, Crabbe and Goyle lumbering in his wake. Hermione slammed the compartment door behind them and turned to look at Harry, who knew at once that she, like him, had registered what Malfoy had said and been just as unnerved by it.

"Chuck us another Frog," said Ron, who had clearly noticed nothing.

Harry could not talk freely in front of Neville and Luna. He exchanged another nervous look with Hermione and then stared out of the window.

He had thought Sirius coming with him to the station was a bit of a laugh, but suddenly it seemed reckless, if not downright dangerous. . . . Hermione had been right. . . . Sirius should not have come. What if Mr. Malfoy had noticed the black dog and told Draco,

what if he had deduced that the Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks, and Moody knew where Sirius was hiding? Or had Malfoy's use of the word "dogging" been a coincidence?

The weather remained undecided as they traveled farther and farther north. Rain spattered the windows in a halfhearted way, then the sun put in a feeble appearance before clouds drifted over it once more. When darkness fell and lamps came on inside the carriages, Luna rolled up *The Quibbler*, put it carefully away in her bag, and took to staring at everyone in the compartment instead.

Harry was sitting with his forehead pressed against the train window, trying to get a first distant glimpse of Hogwarts, but it was a moonless night and the rain-streaked window was grimy.

"We'd better change," said Hermione at last. She and Ron pinned their prefect badges carefully to their chests. Harry saw Ron checking how it looked in the black window.

At last the train began to slow down and they heard the usual racket up and down it as everybody scrambled to get their luggage and pets assembled, ready for departure. Ron and Hermione were supposed to supervise all this; they disappeared from the carriage again, leaving Harry and the others to look after Crookshanks and Pigwidgeon.

"I'll carry that owl, if you like," said Luna to Harry, reaching out for Pigwidgeon as Neville stowed Trevor carefully in an inside pocket.

"Oh — er — thanks," said Harry, handing her the cage and hoisting Hedwig's more securely into his arms.

They shuffled out of the compartment feeling the first sting of the

night air on their faces as they joined the crowd in the corridor. Slowly they moved toward the doors. Harry could smell the pine trees that lined the path down to the lake. He stepped down onto the platform and looked around, listening for the familiar call of “Firs’ years over here . . . firs’ years . . .”

But it did not come. Instead a quite different voice, a brisk female one, was calling, “First years line up over here, please! All first years to me!”

A lantern came swinging toward Harry and by its light he saw the prominent chin and severe haircut of Professor Grubbly-Plank, the witch who had taken over Hagrid’s Care of Magical Creatures lessons for a while the previous year.

“Where’s Hagrid?” he said out loud.

“I don’t know,” said Ginny, “but we’d better get out of the way, we’re blocking the door.”

“Oh yeah . . .”

Harry and Ginny became separated as they moved off along the platform and out through the station. Jostled by the crowd, Harry squinted through the darkness for a glimpse of Hagrid; he had to be here, Harry had been relying on it — seeing Hagrid again had been one of the things to which he had been looking forward most. But there was no sign of him at all.

He can’t have left, Harry told himself as he shuffled slowly through a narrow doorway onto the road outside with the rest of the crowd. *He’s just got a cold or something. . . .*

He looked around for Ron or Hermione, wanting to know what they thought about the reappearance of Professor Grubbly-Plank, but

neither of them was anywhere near him, so he allowed himself to be shunted forward onto the dark rain-washed road outside Hogsmeade station.

Here stood the hundred or so horseless stagecoaches that always took the students above first year up to the castle. Harry glanced quickly at them, turned away to keep a lookout for Ron and Hermione, then did a double take.

The coaches were no longer horseless. There were creatures standing between the carriage shafts; if he had had to give them a name, he supposed he would have called them horses, though there was something reptilian about them, too. They were completely fleshless, their black coats clinging to their skeletons, of which every bone was visible. Their heads were dragonish, and their pupil-less eyes white and staring. Wings sprouted from each wither — vast, black leathery wings that looked as though they ought to belong to giant bats. Standing still and quiet in the gloom, the creatures looked eerie and sinister. Harry could not understand why the coaches were being pulled by these horrible horses when they were quite capable of moving along by themselves.

“Where’s Pig?” said Ron’s voice, right behind Harry.

“That Luna girl was carrying him,” said Harry, turning quickly, eager to consult Ron about Hagrid. “Where d’you reckon —”

“— Hagrid is? I dunno,” said Ron, sounding worried. “He’d better be okay . . .”

A short distance away, Draco Malfoy, followed by a small gang of cronies including Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy Parkinson, was pushing some timid-looking second years out of the way so that they could get

a coach to themselves. Seconds later Hermione emerged panting from the crowd.

“Malfoy was being absolutely foul to a first year back there, I swear I’m going to report him, he’s only had his badge three minutes and he’s using it to bully people worse than ever. . . . Where’s Crookshanks?”

“Ginny’s got him,” said Harry. “There she is . . .”

Ginny had just emerged from the crowd, clutching a squirming Crookshanks.

“Thanks,” said Hermione, relieving Ginny of the cat. “Come on, let’s get a carriage together before they all fill up. . . .”

“I haven’t got Pig yet!” Ron said, but Hermione was already heading off toward the nearest unoccupied coach. Harry remained behind with Ron.

“What *are* those things, d’you reckon?” he asked Ron, nodding at the horrible horses as the other students surged past them.

“What things?”

“Those horse —”

Luna appeared holding Pigwidgeon’s cage in her arms; the tiny owl was twittering excitedly as usual.

“Here you are,” she said. “He’s a sweet little owl, isn’t he?”

“Er . . . yeah . . . He’s all right,” said Ron gruffly. “Well, come on then, let’s get in. . . . what were you saying, Harry?”

“I was saying, what are those horse things?” Harry said, as he, Ron, and Luna made for the carriage in which Hermione and Ginny were already sitting.

“What horse things?”

"The horse things pulling the carriages!" said Harry impatiently; they were, after all, about three feet from the nearest one, it was watching them with empty white eyes. Ron, however, gave Harry a perplexed look.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about — look!"

Harry grabbed Ron's arm and wheeled him about so that he was face-to-face with the winged horse. Ron stared straight at it for a second, then looked back at Harry.

"What am I supposed to be looking at?"

"At the — there, between the shafts! Harnessed to the coach! It's right there in front —"

But as Ron continued to look bemused, a strange thought occurred to Harry.

"Can't . . . can't you see them?"

"See *what*?"

"Can't you see what's pulling the carriages?"

Ron looked seriously alarmed now.

"Are you feeling all right, Harry?"

"I . . . yeah . . ."

Harry felt utterly bewildered. The horse was there in front of him, gleaming solidly in the dim light issuing from the station windows behind them, vapor rising from its nostrils in the chilly night air. Yet unless Ron was faking — and it was a very feeble joke if he was — Ron could not see it at all.

"Shall we get in, then?" said Ron uncertainly, looking at Harry as

though worried about him.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Yeah, go on . . .”

“It’s all right,” said a dreamy voice from beside Harry as Ron vanished into the coach’s dark interior. “You’re not going mad or anything. I can see them too.”

“Can you?” said Harry desperately, turning to Luna. He could see the bat-winged horses reflected in her wide, silvery eyes.

“Oh yes,” said Luna, “I’ve been able to see them ever since my first day here. They’ve always pulled the carriages. Don’t worry. You’re just as sane as I am.”

Smiling faintly, she climbed into the musty interior of the carriage after Ron. Not altogether reassured, Harry followed her.

Mania Goedlief

Daardie nag slaap Harry nie goed nie. Sy ouers weef in en uit sy drome sonder dat hulle ooit iets sê; mevrou Weasley snik by Skepsel se dooie liggaam terwyl Ron en Hermien, wat krone op-het, na haar staan; en Harry bevind hom weer eens in 'n gang wat eindig in 'n deur wat gesluit is. Hy word skielik wakker van sy lit-teken wat brand en sien dat Ron reeds sy klere aanhet en met hom praat.

“... gou maak, Ma is besig om mal te gaan, sy sê ons gaan die trein mis...”

Daar is 'n groot kabaal in die huis. Volgens wat Harry kan aflei, terwyl hy so vinnig moontlik aantrek, het Fred en George hul trom-mels getoor om ondertoe te vlieg omdat hulle te lui was om dit te dra. Die trommels het in Ginny vasgevlieg en haar by twee stelle trappe afgestamp tot onder in die voorportaal. Mevrou Swardt en mevrou Weasley skree albei uit volle bors:

“— KON HAAR ERNSTIG BESEER HET, JULLE SOTTE —”

“— VIESLIKE HALFBLOED, BESMEER DIE HUIS VAN MY VADERS —”

Net toe Harry sy seilskoene aantrek, kom Hermien die kamer haastig en deur die wind binne. Hedwig swaai op Hermien se skouer en sy dra 'n kriewelende Kromskeen in haar arms.

“My ma en pa het Hedwig nou net teruggestuur.” Die uil fladder gediensig af en gaan sit op haar kou. “Is jy reg?”

“Amper. Is Ginny oukei?” vra Harry en sit sy bril op.

“Mevrou Weasley het haar reggetoor. Maar nou kla Maloog dat ons nie kan gaan as Sturgis Podmore nie hier is nie omdat daar dan te min wagte is.”

“Wagte?” sê Harry. “Gaan ons na King's Cross met 'n spul wagte?”

“Jy gaan na King's Cross met wagte,” help Hermien hom reg.

“Hoekom?” sê Harry ergerlik. “Ek dag Woldemort lê kamma laag, of dink hulle hy gaan iewers agter 'n vullisblik uitspring om my te vermoor?”

“Ek weet nie, dis wat Maloog sê.” Hermien kyk afgetrokke op haar horlosie. “Maar as ons nie opskud nie, gaan ons beslis die trein verpas.”

“SAL JULLE KLOMP DADELIK ONDERTOE KOM!” bulder mevrou Weasley. Hermien wip van die skrik en hardloop uit die kamer. Harry gryp vir Hedwig, prop haar in haar kou en volg Hermien met die trappe af terwyl hy sy trommel agternasleep.

Mevrou Swardt se portret brul van woede, maar niemand doen die moeite om die gordyn oor haar toe te trek nie. Al die geraas in die voorportaal sal haar in elk geval net weer laat wakker word.

“Harry, jy kom saam met my en Tonks!” skree mevrou Weasley – oor herhaalde krete van “MODDERBLOEDERS! SKUIM! GESPUIS UIT DIE STOF!” – “Los jou trommel en jou uil, Alastor bring die bagasie. Genadetjie tog, Sirius, Dompeldorius het *nee* gesê!”

’n Beeragtige hond het langs Harry verskyn, wat oor die trommels in die voorportaal moet klouter om by mevrou Weasley te kom.

“Regtig.” sê mevrou Weasley radeloos. “Wel, dis op jou eie risiko!”

Sy pluk die voordeur oop en stap uit in die flou Septemberson. Harry en die hond volg haar. Die deur slaan agter hulle toe en sny mevrou Swardt se krete onmiddellik af.

“Waar is Tonks?” vra Harry. Hy kyk rond terwyl hulle met nommer 12 se kliptrappe af stap, wat verdwyn die oomblik toe hulle op die sypaadjie kom.

“Sy wag daar voor vir ons,” sê mevrou Weasley stroef en vermy dit om na die rondtollende swart hond langs Harry te kyk.

’n Ou vrou op die hoek groet hulle. Sy het stywe grys krulletjies en dra ’n pers hoed wat soos ’n varkveleispastei lyk.

“Hallo, Harry,” sê sy en knipoog. “Ons moet opskud, nè, Molly?” voeg sy by en kyk op haar horlosie.

“Ek weet, ek weet,” kerm mevrou Weasley en rek haar tree, “maar Maloog wou vir Sturgis wag. . . . As Arthur net weer vir ons motors by die Ministerie kon kry. . . . maar deesdae sal Broddelwerk nie eens ’n leë inkbottel vir hom leen nie. . . . hoe Moggels kan reis sonder om te toor.”

Die groot swart hond blaf uitbundig en tol om hulle terwyl hy na duiwe hap en sy eie stert jaag. Harry kan nie help om te lag nie. Sirius was te lank in die huis vasgekleuster. Mevrou Weasley pers haar lippe saam, baie soos tant Perunia.

Dit neem twintig minute om King’s Cross per voet te bereik. Die enigste opspraakwekkende ding wat gebeur, is toe Sirius tot Harry se vermaak ’n paar katte verwilder. Toe hulle eers in die stasie is,

drentel hulle ongeërg by die versperring tussen perron nege en perron tien rond tot alles veilig is. Hulle leun om die beurt daarteen en val toe ewe gemaklik deur na perron nege en 'n driekwart. Dis gepak met studente en hul gesinne oor wie die Hogwarts Express roeterige stoom blaas. Harry asem die bekende reuk in en voel hoe sy bui verbeter. . . . hy gaan sowaar as wraggies terug.

"Ek hoop die ander is betyds," sê mevrou Weasley bekommerd. Sy staar na die smeedysterkoepel bo-oor die perron waardeur die nuwe aankomelinge moet kom.

"Oulike hond, Harry!" roep 'n lang seun met Rastalokke uit.

"Dankie, Lee," sê Harry en grinnik terwyl Sirius sy stert woes waai.

"Dankie tog," sê mevrou Weasley en sy klink verlig, "hier is Alastor met die bagasie, kyk . . ."

Moodie het 'n portier se pet laag oor sy onpaar oë getrek en hink onderdeur die koepel met 'n trollie hoogvol trommels.

"Alles in orde," mompel hy teenoor mevrou Weasley en Tonks, "dink nie ons is gevolg nie . . ."

Sekondes later verskyn meneer Weasley, Ron en Hermien op die perron. Hulle het Moodie se bagasietrollie al amper leeggemaak toe Fred, George en Ginny saam met Lupin opdaag.

"Enige probleme?" grom Moodie.

"Niks," sê Lupin.

"Ek gaan Sturgis nog steeds by Dompeldorius verkla," sê Moodie. "Dis die tweede keer dié week dat hy nie opdaag nie. Hy's besig om net so onbetroubaar soos Mundungus te raak."

"Wel, wees versigtig," sê Lupin en skud almal se hande. Hy bereik Harry heel laaste en gee hom 'n klappie teen die skouer. "Jy ook, Harry. Lig loop."

"Ja, hou jou kop laag en jou oë oop," sê Moodie toe hy ook Harry se hand skud. "En moenie vergeet nie, julle almal – let op wat julle op skrif stel. As julle twyfel, moet dit nie in 'n brief sit nie."

"Dit was lekker om julle klomp te leer ken." Tonks gee vir Hermien en Ginny 'n drukkie. "Ons sal mekaar darem seker gou weer sien."

'n Waarskuwingsfluit klink op en die studente wat nog op die perron is, klim haastig in die trein.

"Opskud, opskud," sê mevrou Weasley verstrooid terwyl sy almal omhels en vir Harry twee keer beetkry. "Skryf . . . soet wees . . . as julle iets vergeet het, sal ons dit aanstuur. . . . op die trein, dadelik, maak gou. . . ."

Vir 'n oomblik rys die groot swart hond op sy agterpote en plaas

sy voorpote op Harry se skouers, maar mevrou Weasley stoot Harry na die trein se deur en sis: "In vadersnaam, Sirius, tree tog meer soos 'n hond op!"

"Sien julle!" roep Harry deur die oop venster toe die trein begin beweeg, terwyl Ron, Hermien en Ginny langs hom staan en wuif. Die figure van Tonks, Lupin, Moodie en meneer en mevrou Weasley raak vinnig kleiner, maar die swart hond hardloop stertswaaiend langs die venster. Die dowwe figure op die perron lag vir die hond wat die trein jaag. Dan gaan hulle om die draai en Sirius verdwyn.

"Hy moes nie saamgekom het nie," sê Hermien in 'n bekommerde stem.

"Ag, moet tog nie so swartgallig wees nie," sê Ron. "Die arme ou was maande laas buite."

"Wel," sê Fred en vryf sy hande, "ons kan nie die hele dag staan en ginnegaap nie, ons moet met Lee besigheid praat. Sien julle later." Hy en George verdwyn na regs in die gang.

Die trein tel vinnig spoed op sodat hulle swaaiend staan en kyk na die huise wat voor die venster verbyflits.

"Sal ons 'n kompartement gaan soek?" vra Harry.

Ron en Hermien kyk na mekaar.

"Hm," sê Ron.

"Ons – wel – ek en Ron moet eintlik in die prefekwa ry," sê Hermien ongemaklik.

Ron kyk nie na Harry nie. Hy is skielik baie geïnteresseerd in sy linkerhand se vingers.

"O," sê Harry. "Goed. Alles reg."

"Ek dink nie ons hoef die hele tyd daar te bly nie," sê Hermien vinnig. "Ons briewe het gesê ons moet ons opdragte by die hoofseun en hoofdogter kry en ons moet die gange van tyd tot tyd patroleer."

"Goed," sê Harry weer. "Wel, ek – dan sien ek julle seker later."

"Ja, beslis," sê Ron en kyk vinnig en verskonend na Harry. "Dis 'n pyn dat ons soontoe moet gaan, ek sal eerder – maar ons moet – ek bedoel, ek hou nie hiervan nie, ek's nie Percy nie," eindig hy uitdagend.

"Toe maar, ek weet," grinnik Harry. Maar toe Hermien en Ron hul trommels, Kromskeen en Pigwidgeon in sy kou na die lokomotief se kant van die trein dra, voel hy 'n vreemde gevoel van verlies. Hy het nog nooit sonder Ron op die Hogwarts Express gery nie.

"Komaan," sê Ginny, "ons moet opskud of ons sal nie vir hulle kan plek hou nie."

"Ja," sê Harry en vat Hedwig se kou in een hand en sy trommel in die ander. Hulle sukkel in die gang af en loer in die verbystap

deur die glaspaneel in die kompartemente se deure, maar almal is reeds vol. Harry merk op dat 'n klomp studente met groot belangstelling na hom staar. Party stamp aan die kinders langs hulle en wys na hom. Eers vyf waens later onthou hy dat die *Daaglikse Profeet* nog die hele somer vir sy lesers vertel wat 'n leuenaar en windsak hy is. Hy wonder bedruk of die mense wat nou so na hom kyk en oor hom fluister dié stories glo.

In die laaste wat tref hulle vir Neville Loggerenberg aan, wat nes Harry in sy vyfde jaar in Griffindor is. Hy sleep sy trommel met een hand en hou sy worstelende padda, Trevor, in 'n stewige greep in sy ander hand vas. Sy ronde gesig blink van inspanning.

"Hallo, Harry," hyg hy. "Hallo, Ginny. Alles is vol. Ek kry nie plek nie."

"Wat bedoel jy?" sê Ginny, wat verby Neville gedruk het en in die kompartement agter hom loer. "Hier is plek, dis net ou Mania Goed-lief daar binne –"

Neville brom iets oor hoe hy nie mense wil pla nie.

"Moenie laf wees nie," sê Ginny laggend, "sy's oukei."

Sy skuif die deur oop en stoot haar trommel in. Harry en Neville volg haar.

"Hallo, Mania," sê Ginny, "is dit oukei as ons hier sit?"

Die meisie voor die venster kyk op. Sy het slonsige blonde hare wat tot in haar middel hang, baie bleek wenkbroue en oë wat uitpeul sodat sy permanent verbaas lyk. Harry weet dadelik hoekom Neville nie hier wou sit nie. Die meisiekind lyk 'n bietjie mallerig. Dalk is dit haar towerstaf wat sy agter haar linkeroor ingesteeek het, of die halssnoer van Botterbierdoppies om haar nek, of die tydskrif wat sy onderstebo sit en lees. Haar oë speel oor Neville en kom tot rus op Harry. Sy knik.

"Dankie," sê Ginny met 'n glimlag.

Harry en Neville tel die drie trommels en Hedwig se kou op die bagasierak en gaan sit. Mania kyk na hulle oor haar onderstebo tydskrif, *Die Vitter*. Dit lyk nie of sy haar oë so baie soos gewone mense knip nie. Sy kyk en kyk na Harry, wat oorkant haar gaan sit het en nou wens hy het nie.

"Het jy lekker vakansie gehou, Mania?" vra Ginny.

"Ja," sê Mania dromerig sonder om haar oë van Harry weg te neem. "Ja, dit was lekker, dankie. Jy's Harry Potter," voeg sy by.

"Ek weet ek is," sê Harry.

Neville giggel. Mania draai haar bleek oë na hom.

"En ek weet nie wie jy is nie."

"Ek is niemand nie," sê Neville vinnig.

"Nee, jy is nie," sê Ginny skerp. "Neville Loggerenberg – Mania Goedlief. Mania is in my standerd, maar in Raweklou."

"Verstand bo maat, is wat die mens die meeste baat," sê Mania in haar sangerige stem.

Sy verdwyn agter haar onderstebo tydskrif en praat nie verder nie. Harry en Neville kyk met geligte wenkbroue na mekaar. Ginny onderdruk 'n giggel.

Die trein spoed ratelend verder oor die wye oop landskap. Dis 'n vreemde, onbestendige soort dag. Die een oomblik is die wa vol sonlig en net die volgende oomblik hang dreigende grys wolke bo hulle.

"Raai wat het ek vir my verjaardag gekry?" sê Neville.

"Nog 'n Onthouer?" sê Harry, wat aan die marmeragtige toestel dink wat Neville se ouma vir hom gestuur het in 'n poging om sy treurige geheue te verbeter.

"Nee," sê Neville. "Maar ek kan doen met een, ek het die oue al lankal verloor . . . nee, kyk hier . . ."

Hy steek die hand wat nie vir Trevor vasklem nie in sy skoolsak en ná hy 'n rukkie daarin rondgegrawe het, haal hy iets uit wat soos 'n klein grys kaktus in 'n pot lyk. Die enigste verskil is dat dit oortrek is met goed wat soos swere lyk, nie stekels nie.

"*Mimulus mimbletonia*," sê hy trots.

Harry staar daarna. Dit pols effens en lyk ontstellend baie soos 'n siek, inwendige orgaan.

"Dis regtig baie, baie raar," sê Neville in sy noppies. "Ek weet nie of daar eens een in die kweekhuis by Hogwarts is nie. Ek kan nie wag om dit vir professor Spruit te wys nie. My grootoom Algie het dit vir my in Assirië gekry. Ek gaan kyk of ek met hom kan teel."

Harry weet Herbolgie is Neville se gunstelingvak, maar hy kan glad nie verstaan wat Neville in hierdie verpotte klein plantjie sien nie.

"Doen dit – hm – enigiets?" vra hy.

"Tonne goed!" sê Neville trots. "Dit het 'n ongelooflike verdedigings-meganisme. Hier, hou gou vir Trevor vas . . ."

Hy plak die skurwepadda in Harry se skoot neer en haal 'n veerpen uit sy skoolsak. Mania Goedlief se uitpeuloë verskyn bo haar onderstebo tydskrif om te sien wat Neville gaan doen. Met sy tong tussen sy tande vasgebyt, lig Neville die *Mimulus mimbletonia* op tot ooghoogte, mik en gee die plant 'n harde prik met sy veerpen se punt.

Vloeistof spuit uit elke sweer op die plant: dik, stinkende donkergroen strale daarvan. Dit tref die plafon en die vensters en spat op

Mania Goedlief se tydskrif. Ginny, wat haar arms net betyds voor haar gesig gegooi het, lyk of sy 'n groen slymhoed ophet, maar die strale tref Harry, wat sy hande vol het om te keer dat Trevor ontsnap, vol in die gesig. Dit ruik soos vrot kraalmis.

Neville, wie se gesig en bolyf ook sopnat is, skud sy kop om die ergste uit sy oë te kry.

"J – Jammer," snak hy. "Ek het *dit* nog nie voorheen probeer nie. Het nie gedink dit sal heeltemal . . . maar moenie worrie nie, Stinksap is nie giftig nie," voeg hy angstig by toe Harry 'n mond vol op die vloer spoeg.

Op daardie presiese oomblik gaan hul kompartement se deur oop.

"O . . . hallo, Harry," sê 'n verbouereerde stem. "Hm . . . slegte tyd?"

Harry vee sy brilglase af met sy vry hand. Cho Chang, Soeker van Raweklou se Kwiddiekspan, 'n baie mooi meisie, staan glimlaggend in die deur, haar pragtige lang swart hare los oor haar skouers.

"O . . . hallo," sê Harry beteuterd.

"Hm . . ." sê Cho. "Wel . . . ek wou net hallo sê . . . tot siens, dan."

Haar gesig is effens pienk toe sy die deur toetrek. Harry sak met 'n kreun terug in sy sitplek. Dit sou só wonderlik gewees het as Cho op hom kon afkom waar hy tussen 'n klomp baie *cool* studente sit wat hulle half simpel lag vir 'n grap wat hy vertel het. Eerder as by Neville en Mania Goedlief, met sy gesig vol Stinksap en 'n skurwe-padda op sy skoot.

"Toe maar," sê Ginny vertroostend, "ons kan maklik hiervan ontslae raak." Sy haal haar towerstaf uit. "*Reinig!*"

Die Stinksap verdwyn.

"Jammer," sê Neville weer in 'n klein stemmetjie.

Ron en Hermien daag eers 'n uur later op. Teen hierdie tyd is die kostrollie reeds verby en Harry, Ginny en Neville het hul pampoen-pasteitjies klaar opgeëet en is besig om Sjokoladepaddakaarte uit te ruil, toe die kompartement se deur oopgaan en die twee instap, vergesel van Kromskeen en Pigwidgeon wat skril in sy kou hoe-hoe.

"Ek gaan dood van die honger," sê Ron. Hy sit Pigwidgeon langs Hedwig neer, gryp 'n Sjokoladepadda by Harry en val op die sitplek langs hom neer. Hy skeur die papiertjie oop, byt die padda se kop af en leun terug met toe oë asof hy 'n baie uitputtende oggend gehad het.

"Wel, daar is twee vyfdejaarprefekte uit elke huis," sê Hermien toe sy gaan sit. Sy lyk omgekrap. "'n Seun en 'n meisie uit elkeen."

"En raai wie is Slibberin se prefek?" sê Ron nog steeds met toe oë.

"Malfoy," antwoord Harry dadelik, seker dat sy ergste vrees bewaarheid sal word.

"Natuurlik," sê Ron bitter terwyl hy die res van die Sjokolade-padda in sy mond prop en nog een vat.

"En daardie totale koei Pansy Parkinson," sê Hermien venynig. "Hoe sy 'n prefek kon word terwyl sy dommer as 'n trol met harsing-skudding is . . ."

"Wie is Hoesenproes s'n?" vra Harry.

"Ernie Macmillan en Hanna Abbott," mompel Ron.

"En Antonie Goldstein en Padma Patel vir Raweklou," sê Hermien.

"Jy het saam met Padma Patel na die Kersbal gegaan," sê 'n dromerige stem.

Almal kyk om na Mania Goedlief, wat bo-oor *Die Vitter* na Ron staar sonder om haar oë te knip.

Ron sluk sy mond leeg. "Ja, ek weet ek het," sê hy effens verbaas.

"Sy't dit nie baie geniet nie," lig Mania hom in. "Sy dink jy was goor met haar omdat jy nie met haar wou dans nie. Ek dink nie ek sou omgee het nie," voeg sy ingedagte by, "ek hou nie juis van dans nie."

Sy verdwyn weer agter *Die Vitter*. Ron se mond hang vir 'n paar sekondes oop terwyl hy na die voorblad staar. Dan kyk hy vraend na Ginny, maar Ginny het haar kneukels in haar mond gedruk om te keer dat sy lag. Ron skud sy kop verbysterd en kyk na sy horlosie.

"Ons moet die gange glo elke nou en dan patrolleer," sê hy vir Harry en Neville, "en ons kan mense straf wat hulle nie gedra nie. Ek kan nie wag om vir Krabbe en Goliat vir iets . . ."

"Jy's nie veronderstel om jou posisie te misbruik nie, Ron!" sê Hermien skerp.

"Ja-ha-ha, want Malfoy sal dit beslis nie doen nie," sê Ron sarkasties.

"Dan gaan jy na sy vlak daal?"

"Nee, ek gaan net sorg dat ek sy pëlle kry voor hy myne kry."

"Jy behoort jou te skaam, Ron —"

"Ek sal vir Goliat laat uitskryf, hy sal lekker bars, hy haat skryf," sê Ron in sy skik. Hy trek sy gesig op 'n gepynigde plooi asof hy hard konsentreer, maak of hy in die lug skryf en praat Goliat se lae gromstem na. "Ek . . . mag . . . nie . . . soos . . . n . . . bobbejaan . . . se agterwêreld . . . lyk . . . nie."

Almal lag, maar niemand lag so hard soos Mania Goedlief nie. Sy skree van plesier, wat Hedwig wakker maak en haar haar vlerke verontwaardig laat klap terwyl Kromskeen sissend op die bagasierak

spring. Mania lag so lekker dat haar tydskrif uit haar greep glip, oor haar bene gly en op die vloer val.

"Dit was snaaks!"

Haar uitpeuloë is vol trane, sy snak na asem en staar stip na Ron. Hy kyk verward na die ander, wat hulle verkneukel in die uitdrukking op sy gesig en in Mania Goedlief, wat haar sye vashou en heen en weer wieg, se oordrewe lagbui.

"Dink jy jy's snaaks?" vra Ron fronsend.

"Bobbejaan... se agterwêreld," stik sy en hou haar ribbes vas.

Almal kyk hoe Mania lag, maar Harry het iets op die tydskrif op die vloer gesien wat hom dit laat opraap. Onderstebo was dit moeilik om die prent op die voorblad uit te maak, maar nou sien Harry dis 'n taamlike swak spotprent van Cornelius Broddelwerk. Harry herken hom net aan sy lemmetjiegroen keil. Broddelwerk se een hand is om 'n sak goud geklem en met die ander verwurg hy 'n gnoom. Die spotprent se opskrif lui: *Hoe ver sal Broddelwerk gaan om Edelgolt te verwerf?*

Daaronder is 'n lys titels van ander artikels.

*Korrupsie in die Kwiddiekliga:
Hoe die Tornado's beheer oorgeneem het
Geheim van die Antieke Runes onthul
Sirius Swardt: skurk of slagoffer?*

"Kan ek dit gou lees?" vra Harry gretig vir Mania.

Sy knik. Sy staar nog steeds uitasem van die lag na Ron.

Harry slaan die tydskrif oop en bestudeer die inhoudsopgawe. Hy het heeltemal vergeet van die tydskrif wat Kingsley vir meneer Weasley gegee het om vir Sirius te neem, maar dit moet dié uitgawe van *Die Vitter* wees.

Hy kry die bladsynommer en blaai opgewonde na die artikel.

Dis ook met 'n taamlike swak spotprent geïllustreer. Om die waarheid te sê, sonder die opskrif sou Harry nie geweet het dis Sirius nie. Sirius staan op 'n hoop menslike beendere, sy towerstaf gereed vir aksie. Die hoofopskrif bo die artikel lui:

SIRIUS – DIE SWARDTSKAAP?

Berugte massamoordenaar of onskuldige sangsensasie?

Harry moet die sin 'n paar keer lees voor hy seker is dat hy dit reg verstaan. Van wanneer af is Sirius 'n sangsensasie?

Reeds vir veertien jaar word aanvaar dat Sirius Swardt skuldig is aan die massamoord op twaalf onskuldige Moggels en een towenaar. Swardt se waaghalsige ontsnapping uit Azkaban twee jaar gelede het gelei tot die grootste soektog wat nog ooit deur die Ministerie vir Towerkuns geloods is. Tot dusver het niemand nog getwyfel dat hy dit verdien om weer gevang en aan die Dementors uitgelewer te word nie.

MAAR VERDIEN HY DIT?

Opspraakwekkende nuwe getuienis het onlangs aan die lig gekom dat Sirius Swardt dalk nie die misdade gepleeg het waarvoor hy na Azkaban gestuur is nie. Die feit is, sê Doris Purkiss van Akantusweg 18, Little Norton, Swardt was waarskynlik nie eens daar toe die moorde gepleeg is nie.

“Wat mense nie besef nie, is dat Sirius Swardt ’n skuilnaam is,” sê mevrou Purkiss. “Die man wat mense glo Sirius Swardt is, is in werklikheid Stompie Shuster, hoofsanger van die populêre sanggroep Die Paaiboelies. Hy het uit die openbare lewe getree nadat hy vyftien jaar gelede tydens ’n konsert in die Little Norton-kerksaal deur ’n raap teen die oor getref is. Ek het hom herken die oomblik toe ek sy foto in die koerant sien. Dis buite die kwessie dat Stompie daardie misdade kon gepleeg het, aangesien hy op daardie betrokke aand ’n romantiese ete by kerslig saam met my geniet het. Ek het aan die Minister vir Towerkuns geskryf en dit is my verwagting, dat hy Stompie, alias Sirius Swardt, binnekort ten volle van alle blaam sal onthef.”

Toe Harry klaar geles het, staar hy ongelowig na die bladsy. Dis seker net ’n grap, dink hy, dalk plaas die tydskrif gereeld sulke komiese artikels. Hy blaai terug na die artikel oor Broddelwerk.

Cornelius Broddelwerk, die Minister vir Towerkuns, het ontken dat hy enige planne het om die bestuur van die towenaarsbank, Edelgolt, oor te neem toe hy vyf jaar gelede tot Minister vir Towerkuns verkies is. Broddelwerk het nog altyd volgehou dat hy “vreedsame samewerking” met die bewakers van ons goud najaag.

MAAR IS DIT SO?

Bronne uit die binnekring het onlangs onthul dat dit Broddelwerk se grootste ambisie is om beheer oor die gnome se goudvoorraad te kry en dat hy nie sal skroom om geweld te gebruik nie.

“Dit sal ook nie die eerste keer wees nie,” het ’n lid van die binnekring gesê. “Cornelius ‘Gnoomvergruiser’ Broddelwerk is wat sy vriende hom noem. Jy moet hom hoor wanneer hy dink niemand luis-

ter nie, o, hy vertel tog te graag hoe hy van gnome ontslae raak: hy laat hulle versuip, hy laat gooi hulle van geboue af, hy vergiftig hulle en bak hulle in pasteie . . .”

Harry lees nie verder nie. Broddelwerk mag baie foute hê, maar Harry kan nie glo dat hy gnome in pasteie sal laat bak nie. Hy blaai vinnig deur die res van die tydskrif en stop kort-kort om iets te lees: 'n beskuldiging dat die Tutshill Tornado's die Kwiddiekliga met 'n kombinasie van afpersing, onwettige besemtoordery en marteling gewen het; 'n onderhoud met 'n towenaar wat daarop aanspraak maak dat hy met 'n Wegveeg Ses na die maan gevlieg en 'n sak maanpaddas as bewys teruggebring het; 'n artikel oor antieke runes, wat ten minste verklaar hoekom Mania Die Vitter onderstebo gelees het. Volgens die tydskrif moet jy die runes op hul koppe laat staan. Dit sal 'n towerspreuk onthul wat jou vyande se ore in koemkwatte sal verander. In die lig van die ander artikels in *Die Vitter* is die teorie dat Sirius Die Paaiboelies se gewese hoofsaanger is, heeltemal sinvol.

“Enigiets wat goed is daarin?” vra Ron toe Harry die tydskrif toemaak.

“Natuurlik nie,” sê Hermien smalend voor Harry kan antwoord. “*Die Vitter* is gemors, almal weet dit.”

“Verskoon my,” sê Mania in 'n stem wat sy dromerige kwaliteit verloor het. “My pa is die redakteur.”

“Ek – o,” sê Hermien en lyk verleë. “Wel . . . dit het interessante . . . ek bedoel, dis eintlik . . .”

“Gee dit hier, asseblief,” sê Mania kil. Sy leun oor en gryp die tydskrif uit Harry se hande. Sy blaai vinnig na haar plek, draai die tydskrif met mening om en verdwyn weer daaragter net toe die kompartement se deur vir die derde keer oopgaan.

Harry kyk om. Hy het dit verwag, maar dit maak nie die gesig van Draco Malfoy wat tussen sy boesemvriende Krabbe en Goliath vir hom staan en grynslag enigsins mooier nie.

“Wat?” sê hy aggressief voor Malfoy sy mond kan oopmaak.

“Maniere, Potter, of ek sal jou detensie moet gee,” sê Malfoy draaiend. Sy gladde blonde hare en spits ken lyk nes sy pa s'n. “Jy sien, anders as jy is ek as prefek aangestel, wat beteken dat ek, anders as jy, die reg het om straf uit te deel.”

“Ja,” sê Harry, “maar jy, anders as ek, is 'n idioot. Los ons uit en loop.”

Ron, Hermien, Ginny en Neville lag. Malfoy se lip krul.

“Sê my, hoe voel dit om tweede beste ná Weasley te wees, Potter?” vra hy.

"Bly stil, Malfoy!" sê Hermien skerp.

"Hmm, dit lyk my ek het iets raak geboor," sê Malfoy smalend. "Wel, lig loop, Potter, want ek gaan soos 'n hond agter jou aandraf vir ingeval jy 'n voet verkeerd sit."

"Gee pad!" sê Hermien en kom orent.

Malfoy gooi 'n laaste venynige blik na Harry voor hy grinnikend uitstap met Krabbe en Goliath agterna. Hermien slaan die kompartement se deur agter hulle toe en kyk na Harry, wat dadelik sien dat sy ook besef het wat Malfoy gesê het en net so ontsteld soos hy is.

"Gooi daar nog 'n Padda," sê Ron, wat duidelik niks gemerk het nie.

Harry kan nie vryelik voor Neville en Mania praat nie. Hy kyk weer bekommerd na Hermien en staar dan deur die venster.

Hy het gedink Sirius se uitstappie stasie toe was 'n gawe grap, maar skielik voel dit roekeloos, indien nie uit en uit gevaarlik nie. Hermien was reg... Sirius moes nie gekom het nie. Wat as meneer Malfoy die groot swart hond opgelet en vir Draco vertel het? Wat as hy die afleiding gemaak het dat die Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks en Moodie weet waar Sirius wegkruip? Of was Malfoy se gebruik van die woord "hond" bloot toevallig?

Die weer bly wisselvallig hoe verder noord hulle reis. Die een oomblik spat die reën halfhartig teen die vensters, dan verskyn die son weer floutjies voor die wolke weer alles toemaak. Toe dit donker word en die lampe aangaan, rol Mania Die Vitter op, bêre dit sorgvuldig in haar sak en begin om almal in die kompartement om die beurt te bestudeer.

Harry sit met sy voorkop teen die ruit en probeer om die eerste glimp van Hogwarts in die verte te kry, maar dis 'n maanlose aand en die reënbevlekte ruite is vuil.

"Ons moet seker aantrek," sê Hermien eindelijk. Hulle maak hul trommels met moeite oop en haal hul skoolklede uit. Sy en Ron steek hul prefek kentekens sorgvuldig teen hul borskaste vas. Harry sien hoe Ron na sy weerkaatsing in die swart venster kyk.

Uiteindelijk begin die trein spoed verloor en hulle hoor die gebruiklike geraas soos almal skarrel om hul bagasie en troeteldiere op te raap, gereed om af te klim. Aangesien Ron en Hermien moet toesig hou, verlaat hulle die kompartement en laat Kromskeen en Pigwidgeon in Harry-hulle se sorg.

"Ek sal daardie uil dra as jy wil," sê Mania toe Harry Pigwidgeon se kou afhaal terwyl Neville vir Trevor versigtig in sy binnesak steek.

"O – hm – dankie," sê Harry. Hy gee die kou vir haar aan en hys Hedwig s'n stewig op in sy arms.

Hulle skuifel uit die kompartement en sluit by die skare in die gang aan. Hulle beweeg stadig na die deure. Harry voel die eerste byt van die naglug teen sy gesig en ruik die dennebome wat aan weerskante van die pad na die meer groei. Toe hy op die perron afklim, spits hy sy ore vir die bekende kreet van "eerstejaars hierheen . . . eerstejaars . . ." terwyl hy rondkyk.

Maar dit kom nie. Pleks daarvan roep heeltemal 'n ander stem, 'n opgewekte vrouestem, uit: "Eerstejaars, vorm 'n ry hierdie kant, asseblief! Alle eerstejaars kom hierheen!"

'n Lantern kom swaai-swaai nader en in die lig daarvan sien Harry die prominente ken en streng haarstyl van professor Growweblaar, die heks wat Hagrid se Versorging van Magiese Kreature-klasse die vorige jaar 'n rukkie lank waargeneem het.

"Waar is Hagrid?" vra hy hardop.

"Ek weet nie," sê Ginny, "maar ons moet padgee. Ons staan in almal se pad."

"O ja . . ."

Harry en Ginny verloor mekaar terwyl hulle met die perron langs stap en die stasie verlaat. Almal stamp en stoot aan Harry, wat met skrefiesoë in die donkerte bly staar op soek na Hagrid. Hy moet iewers wees. Harry het daarop gereken – om weer vir Hagrid te sien, was een van die dinge waarna hy die meeste uitgesien het. Maar daar is nie 'n teken van hom nie.

Hy kan nie die skool verlaat het nie, sê Harry vir homself terwyl hy saam met die ander studente deur 'n nou deur na die pad voor Hogsmeade-stasie skuifel. Hy's seker verkoue of iets.

Hy kyk rond op soek na Ron of Hermien om te hoor of hulle weet hoekom professor Growweblaar weer daar is, maar nie een van hulle is naby nie, dus laat hy toe dat die skare hom na die natgereënde pad stoot.

Hier staan die ongeveer honderd perdlose koetse wat altyd die studente, almal behalwe die eerstejaars, kasteel toe neem. Harry kyk vlugtig na die koetse, draai weg om weer vir Ron en Hermien te soek en kry dan 'n vertraagde reaksie.

Die koetse is nie meer perdloos nie. Daar staan gediertes tussen die disselbome. As hy hulle 'n naam moes gee, sou hy hulle perde noem, hoewel daar ook iets reptielagtigs aan hulle is. Hulle is brandmaer, hul swart velle hang aan geraamtes waarvan elke been sigbaar is. Hul koppe is draakagtig en hul pupillose oë is wit en starend. Vlerke spruit uit elke flank – tamaai leeragtige vlerke wat lyk of hulle aan reusevlermuise behoort. Hulle staan roerloos en geluidloos in die naderende skemer en lyk grieselig en onheilspell-

lend. Harry kan nie verstaan hoekom die koetse deur sulke walglike diere getrek moet word terwyl hulle heeltemal in staat is om vanself te beweeg nie.

“Waar is Pig?” vra Ron se stem reg agter Harry.

“Daardie Mania-meisiemens bring hom,” sê Harry en kyk vinnig om, gretig om met Ron en Hermien oor Hagrid te praat. “Waar dink julle –”

– is Hagrid? Ek weet nie,” sê Ron en hy klink bekommerd. “Ek hoop hy’s oukei . . .”

’n Entjie verder stamp Draco, gevolg deur ’n klein groepie aanhangers wat Krabbe, Goliat en Pansy Parkinson insluit, ’n paar senuagtige tweedejaars uit die pad sodat hy en sy vriende saam in ’n koets kan wees. Sekondes later peul Hermien hygend uit die skare.

“Malfoy was absoluut gemeen met ’n eerstejaar daar agter. Ek sweer ek gaan hom verkla, hy’t sy kenteken nog skaars drie minute en hy gebruik dit klaar om mense nog erger as voorheen te boelie . . . waar’s Kromskeen?”

“Ginny het hom,” sê Harry. “Daar kom sy . . .”

Ginny het so pas met ’n kriewelende Kromskeen in haar arms uit die skare verskyn.

“Dankie,” sê Hermien toe sy die kat by Ginny vat. “Komaan, kom ons kry ’n koets voor almal vol is . . .”

“Ek het nog nie vir Pig nie!” sê Ron, maar Hermien is reeds op pad na die volgende leë koets. Harry bly agter by Ron.

“Wat is hierdie goed, weet jy?” vra hy vir Ron en beduie met sy ken na die afskuwelike perde terwyl die ander studente verby hulle stroom.

“Watter goed?”

“Hierdie perde –”

Mania verskyn met Pigwidgeon se kou in haar hand. Die klein uiltjie kwetter soos altyd opgewonde.

“Hier’s hy,” sê sy. “Hy’s ’n oulike uiltjie, nè?”

“Hm . . . ja . . . hy’s oukei,” sê Ron skor. “Wel, komaan, ons moet inklim . . . wat sê jy daar, Harry?”

“Ek wil weet wat hierdie perdgedoentes is,” sê Harry terwyl hy, Ron en Mania na die koets stap waarin Hermien en Ginny reeds sit.

“Watter perdgedoentes?”

“Die goed wat die koetse trek!” sê Harry ongeduldig. Hulle staan immers net drie tree weg van die naaste een, wat met leë wit oë na hulle kyk. Ron kyk verward na Harry.

“Waarvan praat jy?”

“Ek praat van – kyk!”

Hy gryp Ron se arm en tol hom om sodat hy van aangesig tot aangesig met die gevleuelde perd is. Ron staar vir ’n oomblik daarna, dan kyk hy terug na Harry.

“Waarna moet ek miskien kyk?”

“Na die – daar, tussen die disselhommel! Ingespan voor die koets! Dis hier reg voor –”

Toe Ron nog steeds verbysterd lyk, skiet ’n snaakse gedagte deur Harry se kop.

“Kan . . . kan jy hulle nie sien nie?”

“Wat sien?”

“Kan jy nie sien wat die koetse trek nie?”

Ron lyk nou baie ontsteld. “Is jy oukei, Harry?”

“Ek . . . ja . . .”

Harry voel heeltemal uit die veld geslaan. Die perd is dan reg voor hom. Dit glim solied in die dowwe lig wat deur die stasie se vensters agter hulle val. Stoom slaan uit sy neusgate op in die koue naglug. En tog, tensy Ron net voorgee – en dit sal ’n baie flou grap wees – kan Ron hom nie sien nie.

“Sal ons inklim?” vra Ron huiwerig. Hy kyk bekommerd na Harry.

“Ja,” sê Harry. “Ja, kom ons gaan . . .”

“Dis alles reg,” sê ’n dromerige stem agter Harry terwyl Ron in die donker koets klim. “Jy’s nie besig om mal te word nie. Ek kan hulle ook sien.”

“Kan jy?” vra Harry desperaat. Hy sien die weerkaatsing van die perd met die vlermuisvlerke in Mania se groot bleek oë.

“O ja,” sê Mania. “Ek kon hulle van die begin af sien. Hulle trek nog altyd die koetse. Moenie bekommerd wees nie, jy’s net so min mal as ek.”

Sy glimlag effens en klim ná Ron in die muffrige koets. Harry voel nie juis gerusgestel toe hy haar volg nie.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



THE SORTING HAT'S NEW SONG

Harry did not want to tell the others that he and Luna were having the same hallucination, if that was what it was, so he said nothing about the horses as he sat down inside the carriage and slammed the door behind him. Nevertheless, he could not help watching the silhouettes of the horses moving beyond the window.

“Did everyone see that Grubbly-Plank woman?” asked Ginny. “What’s she doing back here? Hagrid can’t have left, can he?”

“I’ll be quite glad if he has,” said Luna. “He isn’t a very good teacher, is he?”

“Yes, he is!” said Harry, Ron, and Ginny angrily.

Harry glared at Hermione; she cleared her throat and quickly said, "Erm . . . yes . . . he's very good."

"Well, we think he's a bit of a joke in Ravenclaw," said Luna, unfazed.

"You've got a rubbish sense of humor then," Ron snapped, as the wheels below them creaked into motion.

Luna did not seem perturbed by Ron's rudeness; on the contrary, she simply watched him for a while as though he were a mildly interesting television program.

Rattling and swaying, the carriages moved in convoy up the road. When they passed between the tall stone pillars topped with winged boars on either side of the gates to the school grounds, Harry leaned forward to try and see whether there were any lights on in Hagrid's cabin by the Forbidden Forest, but the grounds were in complete darkness. Hogwarts Castle, however, loomed ever closer: a towering mass of turrets, jet-black against the dark sky, here and there a window blazing fiery bright above them.

The carriages jingled to a halt near the stone steps leading up to the oak front doors and Harry got out of the carriage first. He turned again to look for lit windows down by the forest, but there was definitely no sign of life within Hagrid's cabin. Unwillingly, because he had half hoped they would have vanished, he turned his eyes instead upon the strange, skeletal creatures standing quietly in the chill night air, their blank white eyes gleaming.

Harry had once before had the experience of seeing something that Ron could not, but that had been a reflection in a mirror, something much more insubstantial than a hundred very solid-looking beasts

strong enough to pull a fleet of carriages. If Luna was to be believed, the beasts had always been there but invisible; why, then, could Harry suddenly see them, and why could Ron not?

“Are you coming or what?” said Ron beside him.

“Oh . . . yeah,” said Harry quickly, and they joined the crowd hurrying up the stone steps into the castle.

The entrance hall was ablaze with torches and echoing with footsteps as the students crossed the flagged stone floor for the double doors to the right, leading to the Great Hall and the start-of-term feast.

The four long House tables in the Great Hall were filling up under the starless black ceiling, which was just like the sky they could glimpse through the high windows. Candles floated in midair all along the tables, illuminating the silvery ghosts who were dotted about the Hall and the faces of the students talking eagerly to one another, exchanging summer news, shouting greetings at friends from other Houses, eyeing one another’s new haircuts and robes. Again Harry noticed people putting their heads together to whisper as he passed; he gritted his teeth and tried to act as though he neither noticed nor cared.

Luna drifted away from them at the Ravenclaw table. The moment they reached Gryffindor’s, Ginny was hailed by some fellow fourth years and left to sit with them; Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville found seats together about halfway down the table between Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor House ghost, and Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, the last two of whom gave Harry airy, overly friendly greetings that made him quite sure they had stopped talking

about him a split second before. He had more important things to worry about, however: He was looking over the students' heads to the staff table that ran along the top wall of the Hall.

"He's not there."

Ron and Hermione scanned the staff table too, though there was no real need; Hagrid's size made him instantly obvious in any lineup.

"He can't have left," said Ron, sounding slightly anxious.

"Of course he hasn't," said Harry firmly.

"You don't think he's . . . *hurt*, or anything, do you?" said Hermione uneasily.

"No," said Harry at once.

"But where is he, then?"

There was a pause, then Harry said very quietly, so that Neville, Parvati, and Lavender could not hear, "Maybe he's not back yet. You know — from his mission — the thing he was doing over the summer for Dumbledore."

"Yeah . . . yeah, that'll be it," said Ron, sounding reassured, but Hermione bit her lip, looking up and down the staff table as though hoping for some conclusive explanation of Hagrid's absence.

"Who's *that*?" she said sharply, pointing toward the middle of the staff table.

Harry's eyes followed hers. They lit first upon Professor Dumbledore, sitting in his high-backed golden chair at the center of the long staff table, wearing deep-purple robes scattered with silvery stars and a matching hat. Dumbledore's head was inclined toward the woman sitting next to him, who was talking into his ear. She looked, Harry thought, like somebody's maiden aunt: squat, with short, curly,

mouse-brown hair in which she had placed a horrible pink Alice band that matched the fluffy pink cardigan she wore over her robes. Then she turned her face slightly to take a sip from her goblet and he saw, with a shock of recognition, a pallid, toadlike face and a pair of prominent, pouchy eyes.

"It's that Umbridge woman!"

"Who?" said Hermione.

"She was at my hearing, she works for Fudge!"

"Nice cardigan," said Ron, smirking.

"She works for Fudge?" Hermione repeated, frowning. "What on earth's she doing here, then?"

"Dunno . . ."

Hermione scanned the staff table, her eyes narrowed.

"No," she muttered, "no, surely not . . ."

Harry did not understand what she was talking about but did not ask; his attention had just been caught by Professor Grubbly-Plank who had just appeared behind the staff table; she worked her way along to the very end and took the seat that ought to have been Hagrid's. That meant that the first years must have crossed the lake and reached the castle, and sure enough, a few seconds later, the doors from the entrance hall opened. A long line of scared-looking first years entered, led by Professor McGonagall, who was carrying a stool on which sat an ancient wizard's hat, heavily patched and darned with a wide rip near the frayed brim.

The buzz of talk in the Great Hall faded away. The first years lined up in front of the staff table facing the rest of the students, and Professor McGonagall placed the stool carefully in front of them,

then stood back.

The first years' faces glowed palely in the candlelight. A small boy right in the middle of the row looked as though he was trembling. Harry recalled, fleetingly, how terrified he had felt when he had stood there, waiting for the unknown test that would determine to which House he belonged.

The whole school waited with bated breath. Then the rip near the hat's brim opened wide like a mouth and the Sorting Hat burst into song:

*In times of old when I was new
And Hogwarts barely started
The founders of our noble school
Thought never to be parted:
United by a common goal,
They had the selfsame yearning,
To make the world's best magic school
And pass along their learning.
"Together we will build and teach!"
The four good friends decided
And never did they dream that they
Might someday be divided,
For were there such friends anywhere
As Slytherin and Gryffindor?
Unless it was the second pair
Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?
So how could it have gone so wrong?
How could such friendships fail?
Why, I was there and so can tell
The whole sad, sorry tale.*

*Said Slytherin, "We'll teach just those
Whose ancestry is purest."*

*Said Ravenclaw, "We'll teach those whose
Intelligence is surest."*

*Said Gryffindor, "We'll teach all those
With brave deeds to their name."*

*Said Hufflepuff, "I'll teach the lot,
And treat them just the same."*

*These differences caused little strife
When first they came to light,*

*For each of the four founders had
A House in which they might*

*Take only those they wanted, so,
For instance, Slytherin*

*Took only pure-blood wizards
Of great cunning, just like him,*

*And only those of sharpest mind
Were taught by Ravenclaw*

*While the bravest and the boldest
Went to daring Gryffindor.*

*Good Hufflepuff, she took the rest,
And taught them all she knew,*

*Thus the Houses and their founders
Retained friendships firm and true.*

*So Hogwarts worked in harmony
For several happy years,*

*But then discord crept among us
Feeding on our faults and fears.*

*The Houses that, like pillars four,
Had once held up our school,*

*Now turned upon each other and,
Divided, sought to rule.*

*And for a while it seemed the school
Must meet an early end,
What with dueling and with fighting
And the clash of friend on friend
And at last there came a morning
When old Slytherin departed
And though the fighting then died out
He left us quite downhearted.
And never since the founders four
Were whittled down to three
Have the Houses been united
As they once were meant to be.
And now the Sorting Hat is here
And you all know the score:
I sort you into Houses
Because that is what I'm for,
But this year I'll go further,
Listen closely to my song:
Though condemned I am to split you
Still I worry that it's wrong,
Though I must fulfill my duty
And must quarter every year
Still I wonder whether Sorting
May not bring the end I fear.
Oh, know the perils, read the signs,
The warning history shows,
For our Hogwarts is in danger
From external, deadly foes
And we must unite inside her
Or we'll crumble from within.
I have told you, I have warned you. . . .
Let the Sorting now begin.*

The hat became motionless once more; applause broke out, though it was punctured, for the first time in Harry's memory, with muttering and whispers. All across the Great Hall students were exchanging remarks with their neighbors and Harry, clapping along with everyone else, knew exactly what they were talking about.

"Branched out a bit this year, hasn't it?" said Ron, his eyebrows raised.

"Too right it has," said Harry.

The Sorting Hat usually confined itself to describing the different qualities looked for by each of the four Hogwarts Houses and its own role in sorting them; Harry could not remember it ever trying to give the school advice before.

"I wonder if it's ever given warnings before?" said Hermione, sounding slightly anxious.

"Yes, indeed," said Nearly Headless Nick knowledgeably, leaning across Neville toward her (Neville winced, it was very uncomfortable to have a ghost lean through you). "The hat feels itself honor-bound to give the school due warning whenever it feels —"

But Professor McGonagall, who was waiting to read out the list of first years' names, was giving the whispering students the sort of look that scorches. Nearly Headless Nick placed a see-through finger to his lips and sat primly upright again as the muttering came to an abrupt end. With a last frowning look that swept the four House tables, Professor McGonagall lowered her eyes to her long piece of parchment and called out,

"Abercrombie, Euan."

The terrified-looking boy Harry had noticed earlier stumbled forward and put the hat on his head; it was only prevented from falling right down to his shoulders by his very prominent ears. The hat considered for a moment, then the rip near the brim opened again and shouted, "*GRYFFINDOR!*"

Harry clapped loudly with the rest of Gryffindor House as Euan Abercrombie staggered to their table and sat down, looking as though he would like very much to sink through the floor and never be looked at again.

Slowly the long line of first years thinned; in the pauses between the names and the Sorting Hat's decisions, Harry could hear Ron's stomach rumbling loudly. Finally, "Zeller, Rose" was sorted into Hufflepuff, and Professor McGonagall picked up the hat and stool and marched them away as Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet.

Harry was somehow soothed to see Dumbledore standing before them all, whatever his recent bitter feelings toward his headmaster. Between the absence of Hagrid and the presence of those dragonish horses, he had felt that his return to Hogwarts, so long anticipated, was full of unexpected surprises like jarring notes in a familiar song. But this, at least, was how it was supposed to be: their headmaster rising to greet them all before the start-of-term feast.

"To our newcomers," said Dumbledore in a ringing voice, his arms stretched wide and a beaming smile on his lips, "welcome! To our old hands — welcome back! There is a time for speech making, but this is not it. Tuck in!"

There was an appreciative laugh and an outbreak of applause as Dumbledore sat down neatly and threw his long beard over his

shoulder so as to keep it out of the way of his plate — for food had appeared out of nowhere, so that the five long tables were groaning under joints and pies and dishes of vegetables, bread, sauces, and flagons of pumpkin juice.

“Excellent,” said Ron, with a kind of groan of longing, and he seized the nearest plate of chops and began piling them onto his plate, watched wistfully by Nearly Headless Nick.

“What were you saying before the Sorting?” Hermione asked the ghost. “About the hat giving warnings?”

“Oh yes,” said Nick, who seemed glad of a reason to turn away from Ron, who was now eating roast potatoes with almost indecent enthusiasm. “Yes, I have heard the hat give several warnings before, always at times when it detects periods of great danger for the school. And always, of course, its advice is the same: Stand together, be strong from within.”

“Ow kunnit nofe skusin danger ifzat?” said Ron.

His mouth was so full Harry thought it was quite an achievement for him to make any noise at all.

“I beg your pardon?” said Nearly Headless Nick politely, while Hermione looked revolted. Ron gave an enormous swallow and said, “How can it know if the school’s in danger if it’s a hat?”

“I have no idea,” said Nearly Headless Nick. “Of course, it lives in Dumbledore’s office, so I daresay it picks things up there.”

“And it wants all the Houses to be friends?” said Harry, looking over at the Slytherin table, where Draco Malfoy was holding court. “Fat chance.”

“Well, now, you shouldn’t take that attitude,” said Nick.

reprovingly. "Peaceful cooperation, that's the key. We ghosts, though we belong to separate Houses, maintain links of friendship. In spite of the competitiveness between Gryffindor and Slytherin, I would never dream of seeking an argument with the Bloody Baron."

"Only because you're terrified of him," said Ron.

Nearly Headless Nick looked highly affronted.

"Terrified? I hope I, Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, have never been guilty of cowardice in my life! The noble blood that runs in my veins —"

"What blood?" asked Ron. "Surely you haven't still got — ?"

"It's a figure of speech!" said Nearly Headless Nick, now so annoyed his head was trembling ominously on his partially severed neck. "I assume I am still allowed to enjoy the use of whichever words I like, even if the pleasures of eating and drinking are denied me! But I am quite used to students poking fun at my death, I assure you!"

"Nick, he wasn't really laughing at you!" said Hermione, throwing a furious look at Ron.

Unfortunately, Ron's mouth was packed to exploding point again and all he could manage was "node iddum eentup sechew," which Nick did not seem to think constituted an adequate apology. Rising into the air, he straightened his feathered hat and swept away from them to the other end of the table, coming to rest between the Creevey brothers, Colin and Dennis.

"Well done, Ron," snapped Hermione.

"What?" said Ron indignantly, having managed, finally, to swallow his food. "I'm not allowed to ask a simple question?"

“Oh forget it,” said Hermione irritably, and the pair of them spent the rest of the meal in huffy silence.

Harry was too used to their bickering to bother trying to reconcile them; he felt it was a better use of his time to eat his way steadily through his steak-and-kidney pie, then a large plateful of his favorite treacle tart.

When all the students had finished eating and the noise level in the hall was starting to creep upward again, Dumbledore got to his feet once more. Talking ceased immediately as all turned to face the headmaster. Harry was feeling pleasantly drowsy now. His four-poster bed was waiting somewhere above, wonderfully warm and soft.

“Well, now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast, I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices,” said Dumbledore. “First years ought to know that the forest in the grounds is out of bounds to students — and a few of our older students ought to know by now too.” (Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged smirks.)

“Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me, for what he tells me is the four hundred and sixty-second time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes, nor are a number of other things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr. Filch’s office door.

“We have had two changes in staffing this year. We are very pleased to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be taking Care of Magical Creatures lessons; we are also delighted to introduce Professor Umbridge, our new Defense Against the Dark

Arts teacher.”

There was a round of polite but fairly unenthusiastic applause during which Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged slightly panicked looks; Dumbledore had not said for how long Grubbly-Plank would be teaching.

Dumbledore continued, “Tryouts for the House Quidditch teams will take place on the —”

He broke off, looking inquiringly at Professor Umbridge. As she was not much taller standing than sitting, there was a moment when nobody understood why Dumbledore had stopped talking, but then Professor Umbridge said, “*Hem, hem,*” and it became clear that she had got to her feet and was intending to make a speech.

Dumbledore only looked taken aback for a moment, then he sat back down smartly and looked alertly at Professor Umbridge as though he desired nothing better than to listen to her talk. Other members of staff were not as adept at hiding their surprise. Professor Sprout’s eyebrows had disappeared into her flyaway hair, and Professor McGonagall’s mouth was as thin as Harry had ever seen it. No new teacher had ever interrupted Dumbledore before. Many of the students were smirking, this woman obviously did not know how things were done at Hogwarts.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” Professor Umbridge simpered, “for those kind words of welcome.”

Her voice was high-pitched, breathy, and little-girlish and again, Harry felt a powerful rush of dislike that he could not explain to himself; all he knew was that he loathed everything about her, from her stupid voice to her fluffy pink cardigan. She gave another little

throat-clearing cough (“*Hem, hem*”) and continued: “Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say!” She smiled, revealing very pointed teeth. “And to see such happy little faces looking back at me!”

Harry glanced around. None of the faces he could see looked happy; on the contrary, they all looked rather taken aback at being addressed as though they were five years old.

“I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all, and I’m sure we’ll be very good friends!”

Students exchanged looks at this; some of them were barely concealing grins.

“I’ll be her friend as long as I don’t have to borrow that cardigan,” Parvati whispered to Lavender, and both of them lapsed into silent giggles.

Professor Umbridge cleared her throat again (“*Hem, hem*”), but when she continued, some of the breathiness had vanished from her voice. She sounded much more businesslike and now her words had a dull learned-by-heart sound to them.

“The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the Wizarding community must be passed down through the generations lest we lose them forever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished, and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching.”

Professor Umbridge paused here and made a little bow to her

fellow staff members, none of whom bowed back. Professor McGonagall's dark eyebrows had contracted so that she looked positively hawklike, and Harry distinctly saw her exchange a significant glance with Professor Sprout as Umbridge gave another little "*Hem, hem*" and went on with her speech.

"Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be, for without progress there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress's sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation. . ."

Harry found his attentiveness ebbing, as though his brain was slipping in and out of tune. The quiet that always filled the Hall when Dumbledore was speaking was breaking up as students put their heads together, whispering and giggling. Over at the Ravenclaw table, Cho Chang was chatting animatedly with her friends. A few seats along from Cho, Luna Lovegood had got out *The Quibbler* again. Meanwhile at the Hufflepuff table, Ernie Macmillan was one of the few still staring at Professor Umbridge, but he was glassy-eyed and Harry was sure he was only pretending to listen in an attempt to live up to the new prefect's badge gleaming on his chest.

Professor Umbridge did not seem to notice the restlessness of her audience. Harry had the impression that a full-scale riot could have broken out under her nose and she would have plowed on with her speech. The teachers, however, were still listening very attentively, and Hermione seemed to be drinking in every word Umbridge spoke,

though judging by her expression, they were not at all to her taste.

“... because some changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognized as errors of judgment. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness, and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited.”

She sat down. Dumbledore clapped. The staff followed his lead, though Harry noticed that several of them brought their hands together only once or twice before stopping. A few students joined in, but most had been taken unawares by the end of the speech, not having listened to more than a few words of it, and before they could start applauding properly, Dumbledore had stood up again.

“Thank you very much, Professor Umbridge, that was most illuminating,” he said, bowing to her. “Now — as I was saying, Quidditch tryouts will be held . . .”

“Yes, it certainly was illuminating,” said Hermione in a low voice.

“You’re not telling me you enjoyed it?” Ron said quietly, turning a glazed face upon Hermione. “That was about the dullest speech I’ve ever heard, and I grew up with Percy.”

“I said illuminating, not enjoyable,” said Hermione. “It explained a lot.”

“Did it?” said Harry in surprise. “Sounded like a load of waffle to me.”

“There was some important stuff hidden in the waffle,” said

Hermione grimly.

“Was there?” said Ron blankly.

“How about ‘progress for progress’s sake must be discouraged’? How about ‘pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited’?”

“Well, what does that mean?” said Ron impatiently.

“I’ll tell you what it means,” said Hermione ominously. “It means the Ministry’s interfering at Hogwarts.”

There was a great clattering and banging all around them. Dumbledore had obviously just dismissed the school, because everyone was standing up ready to leave the Hall. Hermione jumped up, looking flustered.

“Ron, we’re supposed to show the first years where to go!”

“Oh yeah,” said Ron, who had obviously forgotten. “Hey — hey you lot! Midgets!”

“Ron!”

“Well, they are, they’re titchy . . .”

“I know, but you can’t call them midgets. . . . First years!” Hermione called commandingly along the table. “This way, please!”

A group of new students walked shyly up the gap between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, all of them trying hard not to lead the group. They did indeed seem very small; Harry was sure he had not appeared that young when he had arrived here. He grinned at them. A blond boy next to Euan Abercrombie looked petrified, nudged Euan, and whispered something in his ear. Euan Abercrombie looked equally frightened and stole a horrified look at Harry, who felt the grin slide off his face like Stinksap.

“See you later,” he said to Ron and Hermione and he made his way out of the Great Hall alone, doing everything he could to ignore more whispering, staring, and pointing as he passed. He kept his eyes fixed ahead as he wove his way through the crowd in the entrance hall, then he hurried up the marble staircase, took a couple of concealed shortcuts, and had soon left most of the crowds behind.

He had been stupid not to expect this, he thought angrily, as he walked through much emptier upstairs corridors. Of course everyone was staring at him: He had emerged from the Triwizard maze two months ago clutching the dead body of a fellow student and claiming to have seen Lord Voldemort return to power. There had not been time last term to explain himself before everyone went home, even if he had felt up to giving the whole school a detailed account of the terrible events in that graveyard.

He had reached the end of the corridor to the Gryffindor common room and had come to a halt in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady before he realized that he did not know the new password.

“Er . . .” he said glumly, staring up at the Fat Lady, who smoothed the folds of her pink satin dress and looked sternly back at him.

“No password, no entrance,” she said loftily.

“Harry, I know it!” someone panted from behind him, and he turned to see Neville jogging toward him. “Guess what it is? I’m actually going to be able to remember it for once —” He waved the stunted little cactus he had shown them on the train. “*Mimulus mibletonia!*”

“Correct,” said the Fat Lady, and her portrait swung open toward them like a door, revealing a circular hole in the wall behind, through

which Harry and Neville now climbed.

The Gryffindor common room looked as welcoming as ever, a cozy circular tower room full of dilapidated squashy armchairs and rickety old tables. A fire was crackling merrily in the grate and a few people were warming their hands before going up to their dormitories; on the other side of the room Fred and George Weasley were pinning something up on the notice board. Harry waved good night to them and headed straight for the door to the boys' dormitories; he was not in much of a mood for talking at the moment. Neville followed him.

Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan had reached the dormitory first and were in the process of covering the walls beside their beds with posters and photographs. They had been talking as Harry pushed open the door but stopped abruptly the moment they saw him. Harry wondered whether they had been talking about him, then whether he was being paranoid.

"Hi," he said, moving across to his own trunk and opening it.

"Hey, Harry," said Dean, who was putting on a pair of pajamas in the West Ham colors. "Good holiday?"

"Not bad," muttered Harry, as a true account of his holiday would have taken most of the night to relate and he could not face it. "You?"

"Yeah, it was okay," chuckled Dean. "Better than Seamus's anyway, he was just telling me."

"Why, what happened, Seamus?" Neville asked as he placed his *Mimulus mimbletonia* tenderly on his bedside cabinet.

Seamus did not answer immediately; he was making rather a meal of ensuring that his poster of the Kenmare Kestrels Quidditch team

was quite straight. Then he said, with his back still turned to Harry, "Me mam didn't want me to come back."

"What?" said Harry, pausing in the act of pulling off his robes.

"She didn't want me to come back to Hogwarts."

Seamus turned away from his poster and pulled his own pajamas out of his trunk, still not looking at Harry.

"But — why?" said Harry, astonished. He knew that Seamus's mother was a witch and could not understand, therefore, why she should have come over so Dursley-ish.

Seamus did not answer until he had finished buttoning his pajamas.

"Well," he said in a measured voice, "I suppose . . . because of you."

"What d'you mean?" said Harry quickly. His heart was beating rather fast. He felt vaguely as though something was closing in on him.

"Well," said Seamus again, still avoiding Harry's eyes, "she . . . er . . . well, it's not just you, it's Dumbledore too . . ."

"She believes the *Daily Prophet*?" said Harry. "She thinks I'm a liar and Dumbledore's an old fool?"

Seamus looked up at him. "Yeah, something like that."

Harry said nothing. He threw his wand down onto his bedside table, pulled off his robes, stuffed them angrily into his trunk, and pulled on his pajamas. He was sick of it, sick of being the person who was stared at and talked about all the time. If any of them knew, if any of them had the faintest idea what it felt like to be the one all these things had happened to . . . Mrs. Finnigan had no idea, the stupid woman, he thought savagely.

He got into bed and made to pull the hangings closed around him, but before he could do so, Seamus said, "Look . . . what *did* happen that night when . . . you know, when . . . with Cedric Diggory and all?"

Seamus sounded nervous and eager at the same time. Dean, who had been bending over his trunk, trying to retrieve a slipper, went oddly still and Harry knew he was listening hard.

"What are you asking me for?" Harry retorted. "Just read the *Daily Prophet* like your mother, why don't you? That'll tell you all you need to know."

"Don't you have a go at my mother," snapped Seamus.

"I'll have a go at anyone who calls me a liar," said Harry.

"Don't talk to me like that!"

"I'll talk to you how I want," said Harry, his temper rising so fast he snatched his wand back from his bedside table. "If you've got a problem sharing a dormitory with me, go and ask McGonagall if you can be moved, stop your mummy worrying —"

"Leave my mother out of this, Potter!"

"What's going on?"

Ron had appeared in the doorway. His wide eyes traveled from Harry, who was kneeling on his bed with his wand pointing at Seamus, to Seamus, who was standing there with his fists raised.

"He's having a go at my mother!" Seamus yelled.

"What?" said Ron. "Harry wouldn't do that — we met your mother, we liked her . . ."

"That's before she started believing every word the stinking *Daily Prophet* writes about me!" said Harry at the top of his voice.

“Oh,” said Ron, comprehension dawning across his freckled face.
“Oh . . . right.”

“You know what?” said Seamus heatedly, casting Harry a venomous look. “He’s right, I don’t want to share a dormitory with him anymore, he’s a madman.”

“That’s out of order, Seamus,” said Ron, whose ears were starting to glow red, always a danger sign.

“Out of order, am I?” shouted Seamus, who in contrast with Ron was turning paler. “You believe all the rubbish he’s come out with about You-Know-Who, do you, you reckon he’s telling the truth?”

“Yeah, I do!” said Ron angrily.

“Then you’re mad too,” said Seamus in disgust.

“Yeah? Well unfortunately for you, pal, I’m also a prefect!” said Ron, jabbing himself in the chest with a finger. “So unless you want detention, watch your mouth!”

Seamus looked for a few seconds as though detention would be a reasonable price to pay to say what was going through his mind; but with a noise of contempt he turned on his heel, vaulted into bed, and pulled the hangings shut with such violence that they were ripped from the bed and fell in a dusty pile to the floor. Ron glared at Seamus, then looked at Dean and Neville.

“Anyone else’s parents got a problem with Harry?” he said aggressively.

“My parents are Muggles, mate,” said Dean, shrugging. “They don’t know nothing about no deaths at Hogwarts, because I’m not stupid enough to tell them.”

“You don’t know my mother, she’ll weasel anything out of

anyone!” Seamus snapped at him. “Anyway, your parents don’t get the *Daily Prophet*, they don’t know our headmaster’s been sacked from the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards because he’s losing his marbles —”

“My gran says that’s rubbish,” piped up Neville. “She says it’s the *Daily Prophet* that’s going downhill, not Dumbledore. She’s canceled our subscription. We believe Harry,” he said simply. He climbed into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin, looking owlishly over them at Seamus. “My gran’s always said: You-Know-Who would come back one day. She says if Dumbledore says he’s back, he’s back.”

Harry felt a rush of gratitude toward Neville. Nobody else said anything. Seamus got out his wand, repaired the bed hangings, and vanished behind them. Dean got into bed, rolled over, and fell silent. Neville, who appeared to have nothing more to say either, was gazing fondly at his moonlit cactus.

Harry lay back on his pillows while Ron bustled around the next bed, putting his things away. He felt shaken by the argument with Seamus, whom he had always liked very much. How many more people were going to suggest that he was lying or unhinged?

Had Dumbledore suffered like this all summer, as first the Wizengamot, then the International Confederation of Wizards had thrown him from their ranks? Was it anger at Harry, perhaps, that had stopped Dumbledore getting in touch with him for months? The two of them were in this together, after all; Dumbledore had believed Harry, announced his version of events to the whole school and then to the wider Wizarding community. Anyone who thought Harry was a

liar had to think that Dumbledore was too or else that Dumbledore had been hoodwinked. . . .

They'll know we're right in the end, thought Harry miserably, as Ron got into bed and extinguished the last candle in the dormitory. But he wondered how many attacks like Seamus's he would have to endure before that time came.

Die Sorteelhoed se nuwe lied

Harry het nie lus om vir die ander te sê dat hy en Mania dieselfde drogbeelde sien nie – as dit wel drogbeelde is. Hy hou dus sy mond oor die perde toe hy in die koets klim en die deur agter hom toemaak. Maar hy kan nie anders as om deur die venster na hul silhoeëtte te kyk nie.

“Het julle daardie Growweblaar-vroumens gesien?” vra Ginny. “Wat maak sy hier? Hagrid is darem seker nie weg nie, of hoe?”

“Ek sal bly wees as hy is,” sê Mania. “Hy’s nie juis ’n goeie onderwyser nie.”

“Ja, hy is!” sê Harry, Ron en Ginny vererg.

Harry gluur na Hermien. Sy maak haar keel skoon en sê vinnig: “Hm . . . ja . . . hy’s baie goed.”

“Wel, ons in Raweklou dink hy’s ’n grap,” sê Mania onverstoor.

“Dan het julle maar ’n simpel sin vir humor,” snou Ron terwyl die koetswiele onder hulle knarsend begin rol.

Mania laat haar nie deur Ron se onbeskoftheid afsit nie. Sy staar bloot ’n rukkie na hom asof hy ’n vervelige televisieprogram is.

Die koetse beweeg ratelend en swaaiend in gelid na die hoë klip-pilare versier met gevleuelde wildevarke aan weerskante van die skool se hekke. Toe hulle die terrein binnegaan, leun Harry oor om te sien of daar lig in Hagrid se hut langs die Verbode Woud is, maar die terrein is pikdonker. Die Hogwarts-kasteel kom al nader: ’n hoë massa torings, inkswart teen die donker naghemel, met hier en daar ’n venster wat vlammend gloei.

Die koetse kletter tot stilstand voor die kliptrappe wat na die eikehoutvoor deur lei. Harry klim eerste uit. Hy draai om en kyk weer of daar enige verligte vensters onder by die Woud is, maar daar is geen teken van lewe in Hagrid se hut nie. Dan loer hy onwillig na die vreemde skeletagtige diere met die glinsterende wit oë wat doodstil in die koue naglug staan. Hy het gehoop hulle sal weg wees.

Harry het al voorheen iets gesien wat Ron nie kon sien nie, maar dit was ’n weerkaatsing in ’n spieël, iets baie minder solieds as ’n

honderd diere wat so sterk is dat hulle 'n klomp koetse kan trek. As Mania die waarheid praat, was hulle nog altyd daar, maar onsigbaar. Hoekom kan hy hulle nou skielik sien en Ron nie?

“Kom jy of wat?” sê Ron langs hom.

“O . . . ja,” sê Harry vinnig en hulle stap saam met die ander studente met die kliptrappe op na die kasteel.

Die ingangsportaal is helder verlig met fakkels. Die plaveistene weergalm soos die studente deur die dubbele deure aan die regterkant na die Groot Saal stroom vir die verwelkomingsfees van die nuwe skooljaar.

Die vier lang huistafels in die Groot Saal word vinnig vol. Die plafon is swart en sonder sterre, nes die naghemel wat hulle deur die hoë vensters kan sien. Kerse sweef in die lug bo die tafels en verlig die silwer spoke en die gesigte van studente wat opgewonde oor die vakansie gesels, groete na vriende in ander huise skree en na mekaar se nuwe haarstyle en klede kyk. Harry sien weer hoe mense hul koppe bymekaarsit en fluister as hy verbystap. Hy kners op sy tande en probeer lyk asof hy niks merk en ook nie omgee nie.

Mania dryf weg na die Raweklou-tafel. Die oomblik toe hulle by Griffindor se tafel kom, roep van Ginny se medevierdejaars haar en sy gaan sit by hulle. Harry, Ron, Hermien en Neville gaan sit by mekaar, min of meer in die middel van die tafel naby die Griffindor-huisspook, Nick-amper-sonder-kop, Parvati Patel en Hildegard Braun. Parvati en Hildegard is so oorvriendelik toe hulle vir Harry groet dat hy seker is hulle het hom geskinder. Maar hy het belangriker dinge om hom oor te bekommer. Hy kyk oor die studente se koppe na die personeeltafel wat teen die Saal se boonste muur staan.

“Hy's nie daar nie.”

Ron en Hermien se oë soek ook oor die personeeltafel, hoewel dit eintlik onnodig is. Hagrid is so groot dat hy in enige geselskap bo almal uittroon.

“Hy kan nie wil weg wees nie,” sê Ron effens angstig.

“Natuurlik is hy nie,” sê Harry beslis.

“Jy dink nie dalk hy's . . . beser of iets nie, hè?” sê Hermien ongemaklik.

“Nee,” sê Harry dadelik.

“Maar waar is hy dan?”

Daar is 'n stilte en toe sê Harry baie sag sodat Neville, Parvati en Hildegard nie moet hoor nie: “Dalk is hy nog nie terug nie. Julle weet – van sy sending – dit wat hy die vakansie vir Dompeldorius moes doen.”

“Ja . . . ja, dis seker dit,” sê Ron getroos, maar Hermien byt op

haar lip en kyk op en af langs die personeeltafel asof sy dink sy sal die ware rede vir Hagrid se afwesigheid daar kry.

"Wie's dit?" sê sy skerp en wys na die middel van die personeeltafel.

Harry volg haar blik. Sy oë val eers op professor Dompeldorius wat in die middel van die tafel op sy goue hoërugstoel sit. Hy dra 'n dieppers kleed besprinkel met silwer sterre en 'n bypassende hoed. Sy kop is skuins gedraai na die vrou langs hom wat in sy oor sit en praat. Sy lyk vir Harry soos iemand se oujongnoot-tante: 'n potjierol met kort krullerige muisvaal hare en 'n aaklige pienk haarband. Sy het 'n bypassende donsige pienk knooptrui oor haar kleed aan. Toe sy haar kop effens draai om 'n sluk uit haar wynbeker te neem, herken hy die bleek padda-agtige gesig en prominente oë.

"Dis daai Umbridge-vroumens!"

"Wie?" sê Hermien.

"Sy was by my verhoor. Sy werk vir Broddelwerk!"

"Oulike trui," grynslag Ron.

"Sy werk vir Broddelwerk!" herhaal Hermien fronsend. "Wat op aarde doen sy dan hier?"

"Weetie . . ."

Hermien bekyk die personeeltafel deur vernoude oë.

"Nee," prewel sy, "nee, dit kan tog nie . . ."

Harry weet nie waarvan sy praat nie en vra ook nie. Professor Growweblaar, wat pas agter die personeeltafel verskyn het, het sy aandag getrek. Sy loop na die verste punt van die tafel en gaan sit op Hagrid se plek. Dit moet beteken dat die eerstejaars die meer oorgesteek het en reeds by die kasteel is. En sowaar, 'n paar oomblikke later gaan die deure uit die ingangsportaal oop. 'n Lang ry eerstejaars wat erg verskrik lyk, volg professor McGonagall na binne. Sy dra 'n stoeltjie waarop 'n baie ou towenaarshoed lê, kwaai gelap en gestop en met 'n groot skeur naby die uitgerafelde rand.

Die gegons van stemme in die Groot Saal sterf weg. Die eerstejaars vorm 'n ry voor die personeeltafel sodat hulle na die res van die studente kyk. Professor McGonagall sit die stoeltjie voor hulle neer en staan eenkant toe.

Die eerstejaars se gesigte lyk bleek in die kerslig. 'n Seuntjie heel voor in die middelste ry lyk of hy bewee. Harry onthou vir 'n vlietende oomblik hoe dit gevoel het toe hy daar gestaan en wag het vir die onbekende toets wat sal bepaal na watter huis hy moet gaan.

Die hele skool wag met ingehoue asem. Dan gaan die skeur by die rand so wyd soos 'n mond oop en die Sorteelhoed begin sing:

In die ou tyd toe ek jonk was
en Hogwarts heeltemal nuut,
wou die stigters van dié instituut
vir ewig en altyd saamstaan;
Verenig deur dieselfde doel
had hul net een begeerte:
die oordrag van hul kennis
in die allerbeste towerskool.
"Saam sal ons onderrig en bou!"
het die vier vriende beslis,
en nooit het hulle toe kon gis
dat hul weë wel sou skei nie.
Want was daar vriende meer getrou
as Griffindor en Slibberin?
Behalwe dalk die twee vriendinne:
Hoesenproes en Raweklou.
Hóé kon idees so sheef loop?
Hóé kon die vriendskap saal?
Wel, ek was daar en ken voorwaar
die hele tragiese verhaal.
Sê Slibberin: "Ons leer net dié
wie se voorouers volkome rein is."
Sê Raweklou: "Ons leer net dié
met die allerbeste breine."
Sê Griffindor: "Ons leer net hulle
wat sterk en dapper is."
Sê Hoesenproes: "Ek leer die res,
ek sien glad geen verskille."
In die begin het hul idees
tot geen onmin gelei
nie, want elke stigterslid
het 'n eie huis gekry
en kon self besluit wie daarin
hoort; so het sluwe Slibberin
net volbloedhekskinderen
so slim en slinks as hy gewerf,
terwyl die flinkes van verstand
na Raweklou se huis is,
en die heel moediges
by dapper Griffindor tuis is.
Goeie Hoesenproes het al die ander
in haar arms toegevou,

en die huise en hul stigters
het hul vriendskap lank behou.
So het Hogwarts jare lank
gelukkig saamgewerk,
maar twis en stryd het ingesluip
en foute en vrese versterk.
Die huise wat soos vier pilare
ons skool eers hoog gedra
het, het teen mekaar gekeer
en mekaar probeer beheer.
En vir 'n tyd is daar gevrees
die skool is op sy knieë,
want met tweestryd en twistery
is vriend teen vriend gekeer.
Maar eindlik het die dag gedaag
dat Slibberin die afgog blaas;
so is die strydbyl wel begraaf,
hoewel die kwaad gedaan was.
En sedert die vier stigters
verminder is tot drie,
is die huise nie verenig
soos dit bedoel was nie.
En hier is die Sorteelhoed,
julle ken al my werkswyse:
ek sorteer julle in vier huise,
want dis wat ek moet doen.
Maar vanjaar gaan ek verder;
Luister mooi na my lied:
Gedoem om julle te sorteer,
wens ek dit was verbied.
Hoewel dit tans my plig is
om elke jaar in vier te sny,
is ek bevrees dat dié proses
ons almal bitter gaan laat ly.
So, ken die gevare, lees die tekens,
die lesse wat die tyd ons leer,
want ons eie Hogwarts word bedreig
deur vyande van buite.
Ja, laat ons almal hande hou
voor dit vir ewig te laat
is, ek het gesê, ek het gepraat . . .
Die Sorteendery kan begin.

Die hoed bly stil en almal klap hande, maar vir die eerste keer sedert Harry in Hogwarts is, brom en fluister mense tydens die applous. Oral in die Groot Saal word onderlangs gepraat en Harry, wat saam hande klap, weet presies waarom.

“’n Bietjie langer as gewoonlik, hè?” sê Ron met geligte wenkbroue.

“Dit kan jy weer sê,” antwoord Harry.

Die Sorteelhoed beskryf gewoonlik net die eienskappe waarna elke Hogwarts-huis soek en sy eie rol in die sorteerderij. Harry kan nie onthou dat dit die skool al ooit tevore raad gegee het nie.

“Ek wonder of hy al ooit voorheen waarskuwings gegee het?” sê Hermien en sy klink effens angstig.

“Ja, inderdaad,” sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop beterweterig. Hy leun oor Neville na Hermien (Neville krimp inmekaar, want dis nie lekker as ’n spook deur jou leun nie). “Die hoed voel verplig om die skool te waarsku wanneer hy dink – ”

Maar professor McGonagall is gereed om die eerstejaars se name uit te lees en sy kyk vernietigend na die fluisterende studente, ’n skroeïende kyk. Die gemompel hou dadelik op. Nick-amper-sonder-kop sit regop en plaas ’n deursigtige vinger ewe sedig teen sy lippe toe die gemompel skielik stop. Professor McGonagall kyk vir oulaas fronsend na die vier huistafels voor sy haar oë na die lang stuk perkament in haar hand laat sak en die eerste naam uitroep.

“Abercrombie, Euan.”

Die verskrikte seuntjie wat Harry vroeër opgelet het, strompel vorentoe en sit die hoed op sy kop. Sy bakore is al wat keer dat die hoed tot op sy skouers afsak. Die hoed dink ’n rukkie. Dan gaan die skeur oop en hy skree:

“Griffindor!”

Harry klap hard saam met die res van Griffindor hande terwyl Euan Abercrombie na hul tafel steier en gaan sit. Hy lyk asof hy baie graag deur die vloer wil sink sodat niemand ooit weer na hom kan kyk nie.

Die lang ry eerstejaars word stadig korter. In die stiltes tussen die name en die Sorteelhoed se besluit, hoor Harry hoe Ron se maag rammel. Uiteindelik word “Zeller, Rosa” na Hoesenproes gestuur. Professor McGonagall tel die hoed en stoeltjie op en dra dit uit terwyl professor Dompeldorius opstaan.

Toe Harry na Dompeldorius kyk, kan hy nie meer so bitter teenoor hom voel nie. Met Hagrid wat nie daar is nie en die draakagtige perde wat hy gesien het, het Harry begin voel dat sy aankoms by Hogwarts, waarna hy so lank uitgesien het, vol onverwagte ver-

assings was, soos 'n bekende lied vol vals note. Maar dit is ten minste nes altyd: hul skoolhoof wat opstaan om almal te groet voor die eerste fees van die nuwe kwartaal.

"Aan alle nuwelinge," sê Dompeldorius in 'n welluidende stem, sy arms wyd uitgestrek en 'n stralende glimlag op sy gesig, "welkom! Aan al die ou gesigte – welkom terug! Daar is 'n tyd vir toesprake, maar dis nie nou nie. Val weg!"

Almal lag en klap verlig hande toe. Dompeldorius gaan sit en sy lang baard oor sy skouer gooi sodat dit nie deur sy kos moet sleep nie – want kos het uit die niet verskyn. Die vyf lang tafels kreun onder bakke vleis en pastei, skottels vol groente, brood en sous, en skinkkanne vol pampoensap.

"Lekker," sê Ron met 'n soort verlangende kreun. Hy gryp die naaste bak tjops en begin om sy bord vol te laai terwyl Nick-amper-sonder-kop hongereg na hom staan.

"Wat het jy netnou voor die sorteerderij gesê?" vra Hermien vir die spook. "Oor die hoed wat waarskuwings gee?"

"O ja," sê Nick en dit lyk of hy bly is om te kan wegkyk van Ron, wat nou gulsig aan sy gebraaide aartappels smul. "Ja, ek het die hoed al verskeie waarskuwings hoor gee, altyd wanneer hy dink die skool is in groot gevaar. En natuurlik is sy raad altyd dieselfde: staan saam, wees sterk van binne."

"Ho eety dieskolis innevaar?" sê Ron.

Sy mond is so vol dat Harry dink dis 'n prestasie dat hy hoegenaamd 'n geluid kon uitkry.

"Ekskuus?" sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop beleef, terwyl Hermien gewalg lyk. Ron sluk swaar en sê: "Hoe weet hy die skool is in gevaar as hy net 'n hoed is?"

"Ek weet regtig nie," sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop. "Hy woon natuurlik in Dompeldorius se kantoor en ek veronderstel hy tel allerhande dinge daar op."

"En hy wil hê al die huise moet vriende wees?" sê Harry en kyk na die Slibberin-tafel waar Draco Malfoy oor almal baasspeel. "Wat 'n grap."

"Jy moenie so 'n houding inneem nie," sê Nick vermanend. "Vreedsame samewerking, dis die sleutel. Ons spoke behou ons vriendskapsbande hoewel ons aan verskillende huise behoort. Ten spyte van die kompetisie tussen Griffindor en Slibberin sal ek nie daarvan droom om met die Bloedige Baron skoor te seek nie."

"Dis net omdat jy vrek bang vir hom is," sê Ron.

Nick-amper-sonder-kop lyk hoogs verontwaardig.

"Vrek bang? Ek verseker jou dat ek, sir Nicholas de Mimsy-

Porpington, my nog nooit aan lafhartigheid skuldig gemaak het nie! Die edele bloed wat in my are vloei – ”

“Watter bloed?” vra Ron. “Jy’t mos nie nog altyd – ?”

“Ek bedoel dit figuurlik!” sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop, wat nou so kwaad is dat sy kop gevaarlik op sy halfafgekapte nek bewe. “Ek mag darem seker nog sekere woorde gebruik, hoewel die vreugdes van eet en drink my ontnem is! Ek verseker jou, ek is heeltemal gewoond aan studente wat die spot dryf met my dood!”

“Toe maar, Nick, hy’t nie regtig vir jou gelag nie,” sê Hermien en kyk kwaai na Ron.

Maar Ron se mond is al weer tot oorlopens toe vol dat hy net kan mompel. “Ekouneteet.” Dit lyk nie of Nick dit as ’n verskoning beskou nie. Hy styg op, stoot sy geveerde hoed reg, swiep na die oorkant van die tafel en kom tussen die Creevey-broers, Colin en Dennis, tot rus.

“Mooi so, Ron,” snou Hermien.

“Wat?” sê Ron verontwaardig toe hy sy mond eindelijk leeggesluk het. “Mag ek nie ’n eenvoudige vraag vra nie?”

“Vergeet dit,” sê Hermien ergerlik en vir die res van die ete handhaaf hulle ’n nukkerige stilte.

Teen hierdie tyd is Harry al te gewoond aan hul stryery om te probeer vrede maak. Hy voel hy kan sy tyd beter gebruik deur sy volle aandag te wy aan sy bief-en-niertjie-pastei en daarna ’n groot porsie van sy gunstelingstrooptert.

Toe al die studente klaar geëet het en die geraasvlakke in die Groot Saal begin toeneem, staan Dompeldorius weer op. Almal hou onmiddellik op met praat en kyk na die skoolhoof. Harry voel nou lekker lomerig. Sy hemelbed wag daar bo vir hom, lekker sag en warm.

“Wel, noudat ons nog ’n manjifieke lees agter die blad het, versoek ek julle aandag vir ’n paar oomblikke vir die gewone kwartaal-like afkondigings,” sê Dompeldorius. “Eerstejaars moet kennis neem dat die Woud verbode terrein vir studente is – ’n paar van die ouer studente behoort dit teen hierdie tyd ook al te weet.” (Harry, Ron en Hermien grinnik vir mekaar.)

“Meneer Fillis, die opsigter, het gevra dat ek, vir wat volgens hom die vierhonderd-twee-en-sestigste keer is, julle daaraan herinner dat geen toordery tussen klasse in die gange toegelaat word nie. Daar is ook ’n groot aantal ander dinge op die uitgebreide lys teen meneer Fillis se kantoordeur waarop julle moet let.

“Ons het vanjaar twee veranderings in die personeel. Ons verwelkom professor Growwebelaar terug, wat Versorging van Magiese

Kreature gaan onderrig en wil ook professor Umbridge, ons nuwe onderwyser vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste, aan julle bekendstel."

Daar word beleef maar floutjies hande geklap. Harry, Ron en Hermien kyk paniekerig na mekaar. Dompeldorius het glad nie gesê hoe lank Growweblaar gaan klasgee nie.

Dompeldorius gaan voort: "Proewe vir die huis-Kwiddiekspanne sal plaasvind op –"

Hy bly stil en kyk vraend na professor Umbridge. Aangesien sy nie veel langer is wanneer sy staan as wanneer sy sit nie, wonder almal vir 'n oomblik hoekom Dompeldorius stilgebly het, maar dan maak professor Umbridge haar keel skoon, "Hem, hem," en dis skielik duidelik dat sy opgestaan het om 'n toespraak te maak.

Dompeldorius lyk net vir 'n oomblik uit die veld geslaan. Dan gaan sit hy vinnig en kyk flink na professor Umbridge asof hy baie graag na haar wil luister. Van die ander personeellede steek hul verbasing nie so goed weg nie. Professor Spruit se wenkbroue verdwyn onder haar woeste hare en professor McGonagall se mond is dunner as wat Harry dit nog ooit gesien het. Geen nuwe onderwyser het al ooit vir Dompeldorius in die rede geval nie. 'n Paar studente giggel. Dis duidelik dat hierdie vrou nie weet hoe dinge by Hogwarts gedoen word nie.

"Dankie vir die vriendelike verwelkoming, professor Dompeldorius," sê professor Umbridge aanstellerig.

Haar hoë stem, uitasem en kinderlik, laat die weersin in Harry opwel. Hy kan dit nie verklaar nie. Al wat hy weet, is dat hy niks aan haar kan verdra nie, nie haar simpel stem nie en ook nie haar wollerige pienk trui nie. Sy gee nog 'n klein hoesie om haar keel skoon te kry ("hem, hem") en gaan voort.

"Ek moet sê, dis heerlik om weer by Hogwarts te wees!" Sy glimlag en ontbloot klein skerp tandjies. "En om al hierdie gelukkige klein gesiggies te sien wat na my kyk!"

Harry kyk om. Nie een van die gesigte lyk gelukkig nie. Intendeel, almal lyk 'n bietjie uit die veld geslaan om aangespreek te word asof hulle vyf jaar oud is.

"Ek sien uit daarna om julle almal te leer ken en ek is seker ons sal almal baie goeie vriende wees!"

Die studente loer na mekaar. Party sukkel om nie te lag nie.

"Ek sal haar maatjie wees solank sy nie daardie trui vir my wil leen nie," fluister Parvati vir Hildegard en hulle giggel onderlangs.

Professor Umbridge maak weer haar keel skoon ("hem, hem"), maar toe sy voortgaan, klink sy nie meer uitasem nie. Sy klink saaklik, asof sy die woorde uit haar kop geleer het.

“Die Ministerie vir Towerkuns het die opvoeding van jong hekse en tovenaars nog altyd as van die opperste belang beskou. Die sonderlinge gawes waarmee julle gebore is, sal verlore gaan as dit nie met groot sorg gevoed en gevorm word nie. Die antieke vaardighede uniek aan die tovenaarsgemeenskap moet van geslag tot geslag oorgedra word om nie vir altyd verlore te gaan nie. Die skatkis van towerkennis wat deur ons voorvaders versamel is, moet bewaak, aangevul en geslyp word deur diegene wat tot die edele professie van die onderwys geroep is.”

Professor Umbridge bly stil en maak ’n klein buiginkie na haar medepersoneellede. Niemand buig terug nie. Professor McGonagall se donker wenkbroue is so styf saamgetrek dat sy soos ’n valk lyk. Harry sien duidelik hoe sy betekenisvol na professor Spruit kyk toe Umbridge nog ’n keer “hem, hem” voor sy verder praat.

“Elke skoolhoof van Hogwarts het iets nuuts bygedra tot die groot taak om hierdie geskiedkundige skool te bestuur. Dit is dan ook hoe dit moet wees, want sonder verandering is daar stagnasie en agteruitgang. Verandering ter wille van verandering moet egter ontmoedig word, want tradisies wat die toets van die tyd deurstaan het, het gewoonlik nie lapwerk nodig nie. ’n Balans moet dus tussen oud en nuut geskep word, tussen bestendigheid en verandering, tussen tradisie en innovasie.”

Harry kom agter dat sy gedagtes dwaal asof sy brein aan- en afskakel. Die stilte wat tydens Dompeldorius se toespraak in die Saal geheers het, het verkrummel. Studente fluister en giggel met hul koppe bymekaar. Cho Chang by die Raweklou-tafel gesels opgewonde met haar vriendinne. Mania Goedlief, wat ’n paar plekke daarvandaan sit, het *Die Vitter* uitgehaal. Ernie Macmillan aan die Hoesenproes-tafel is een van die handjie vol wat nog na professor Umbridge staar, maar sy oë is glasig en Harry is seker hy maak net of hy luister oor die splinternuwe prefek kenteken teen sy bors.

Dit lyk nie of professor Umbridge enigsins agterkom dat haar gehoor rusteloos is nie. Harry kry die gevoel dat sy sal aanhou praat selfs al bars ’n volskaalse oproer onder haar neus los. Die onderwysers luister egter steeds aandagtig en dit lyk of Hermien elke woord indrink, hoewel haar gesig duidelik wys dat alles nie in haar smaak val nie.

“... omdat sommige veranderings ten goede is, terwyl ander weer met verloop van tyd as oordeelsfoute herken sal word. Intussen moet sekere ou gewoontes behoue bly, en met reg so, terwyl ander wat uitgedien is, versak moet word. Kom ons beweeg vorentoe na ’n tydperk van nuwe openheid, doelmatigheid en toereken-

waarheid, met die doel om te behou wat behoue moet bly, te verbeter wat verbeter moet word en praktyke wat verbode behoort te wees, uit te roei."

Sy gaan sit. Dompeldorius klap hande. Die personeel volg sy voorbeeld, hoewel Harry sien dat party hul hande net een of twee keer klap voor hulle ophou. 'n Paar studente klap ook, maar die meeste is onkant gevang. Hulle het net na die eerste paar woorde geluister en nie dadelik agtergekom toe die toespraak eindig nie.

Dompeldorius staan op voor almal behoorlik kan begin klap. "Baie dankie, professor Umbridge, dit was werklik insiggewend," sê hy en buig vir haar. "Nou, soos ek reeds gesê het, Kwiddiekproewe sal gehou word . . ."

"Dit was beslis insiggewend," sê Hermien gedemp.

"Moenie vir my sê jy't dit geniet nie," sê Ron oorbluf. "Dit was die verveligste gepraat wat ek nog ooit gehoor het en ek het saam met Percy grootgeword."

"Ek het gesê insiggewend, nie genotvol nie," sê Hermien. "Dit verklaar baie dinge."

"Hè?" sê Harry verbaas. "Dit het vir my na 'n spul onsin geklink."

"Daar was 'n hele klomp belangrike dinge versteek in daardie onsin," sê Hermien skor.

"Daar was?" sê Ron beteuterd.

"Wat van verandering ter wille van verandering moet ontmoedig word? Wat van praktyke wat verbode behoort te wees, uit te roei?"

"Wel, wat beteken dit?" vra Ron ongeduldig.

"Ek sal vir jou sê wat dit beteken," sê Hermien deur knersende tande. "Dit beteken die Ministerie meng by Hogwarts in."

Daar is 'n groot geklater en gedruis om hulle. Dompeldorius moet die ete so pas verdaag het, want almal staan op en maak gereed om te loop. Hermien spring verbouereerd op.

"Ron, ons moet vir die eerstejaars wys waarheen om te gaan!"

"O ja!" sê Ron, wat duidelik vergeet het. "Haai – haai, julle klomp muggies!"

"Ron!"

"Wel, hulle is, hulle is so klein . . ."

"Ek weet, maar jy kan hulle nie muggies noem nie! Eerstejaars!" sê Hermien gebiedend langs die tafel af. "Volg my, asseblief!"

'n Groep nuwelinge kom skameng tussen Griffindor en Hoesenproes se tafels deur. Almal probeer om nie die een te wees wat voor loop nie. Hulle is beslis baie klein. Harry is seker hy het nie so jonk gelyk toe hy hier aangekom het nie. Hy grinnik vir hulle. 'n Blonde seun langs Euan Abercrombie lyk doodverskrik. Hy stamp aan Euan

en fluister iets in sy oor. Nou lyk Euan Abercrombie net so benoud. Hy kyk paniekerig na Harry, wat voel hoe sy glimlag soos Stinksap van sy gesig gly.

“Sien julle later,” sê hy stug vir Ron en Hermien voor hy alleen uit die Groot Saal stap. Hy doen sy bes om die gefluister, gestaar en gewys te ignoreer deur net voor hom te kyk. Hy vleg deur die mense in die ingangsportaal, draf op met die marmertappe en neem ’n paar geheime kortpaadjies sodat hy die meeste studente gou agterlaat.

Hy was dom om dit nie te verwag het nie, dink hy ergerlik terwyl hy deur die boonste gange stap wat taamlik leeg is. Natuurlik sal almal na hom staan. Hy het twee maande gelede uit die Drietowenaarsdoolhof gekom met die dooie liggaam van ’n skoolmaat in sy arms en gesê die heer Woldemort lewe weer. Daar was nie aan die einde van die vorige kwartaal genoeg tyd om alles te verduidelik voor almal huis toe is nie. Nie dat hy toe vir die hele skool in besonderhede sou kon vertel watter gruwele in daardie begraafplaas plaasgevind het nie.

Hy is aan die einde van die gang by die Vet Vrou se portret toe hy besef dat hy nie die nuwe wagwoord vir toegang tot die Griffindor-geselskamer ken nie.

“Hm . . .” sê hy bekaf en staan na die Vet Vrou, wat die voue van haar pienk satynrok gladstryk en streng na hom kyk.

“Geen wagwoord, geen toegang,” sê sy kwaai.

“Harry, ek ken dit!” Iemand kom hygend aangedraf.

Harry draai om en sien dis Neville.

“Raai wat is dit! Ek gaan dit vir ’n verandering onthou –” Neville waai die verpotte kaktus wat hy op die trein by hom gehad het in die lug. “*Mimulus mimbletonia!*” skree hy.

“Korrek,” sê die Vet Vrou en haar portret swaai soos ’n deur na buitentoe oop. Harry en Neville klouter deur die ronde opening.

Die Griffindor-geselskamer lyk net so gesellig soos altyd, ’n warm ronde toringkamer vol sagte, gehawende leunstoele en ou lendelam tafels. ’n Vuur knetter vrolik in die kaggel en ’n paar mense is besig om hul hande warm te maak voor hulle na hul slaapsale gaan. Aan die oorkant van die vertrek is Fred en George Weasley besig om iets teen die kennisgewingbord vas te steek. Harry waai goeienag en stap na die deur wat lei na die seuns se slaapsale. Hy is nie nou lus vir praat nie. Neville kom agterna.

Dean Thomas en Septimus Floris is reeds in die slaapsaal besig om die mure langs hul beddens met plakkate en foto’s te versier. Hulle bly skielik stil toe Harry die deur oopstoot. Harry wonder eers of hulle oor hom gepraat het en toe of hy aan vervolgingswaansin ly.

“Hallo,” sê hy, stap na sy trommel en maak dit oop.

“Hallo, Harry,” sê Dean, wat besig is om sy pajamas in West Ham se kleure aan te trek. “Hoe was jou vakansie?”

“Was oukei,” mompel Harry. Dit sal die hele nag duur as hy moet vertel hoe dit regtig was en hy sien nie nou daarvoor kans nie. “En joune?”

“Ja, dit was oukei, wat,” giggel Dean. “Beter as Septimus s’n. Hy’t nou net vir my vertel.”

“Hoekom? Wat het gebeur?” Neville sit sy *Mimulus Mimbletonia* versigtig op sy bedkassie neer.

Septimus antwoord nie dadelik nie. Hy is besig om ’n plakkaat van die Kenmare Kestrels-kwiddiekspan teen die muur te hang en maak ’n groot gedoente daarvan. “My ma wou nie hê ek moet terugkom nie,” sê hy, sy rug nog steeds na Harry gekeer.

“Wat?” sê Harry, sy kleed halfpad oor sy kop.

“Sy wou nie hê ek moet terugkom Hogwarts toe nie.”

Septimus los die plakkaat en haal sy pajamas uit sy trommel. Hy kyk nog steeds nie na Harry nie.

“Maar – hoekom?” sê Harry verbaas. Septimus se ma is ’n heks, hy kan nie verstaan hoekom sy skielik soos die Dursleys sou optree nie.

Septimus antwoord eers nadat hy sy pajamas tot onder toegeknoop het.

“Wel,” sê hy afgemete, “ek dink . . . dis oor jou.”

“Wat bedoel jy?” sê Harry.

Sy hart klop vinniger. Dit voel asof iets skerp hom wil toevou.

“Wel,” sê Septimus weer en hy vermy Harry se oë nog steeds, “sy . . . hm . . . wel, dis nie net jy nie, dis ook Dompeldorius . . .”

“Sy glo die *Daaglikse Profeet*?” sê Harry. “Sy dink ek’s ’n leuenaar en Dompeldorius ’n ou sot?”

Septimus kyk op na hom.

“Ja, so iets.”

Harry sê niks. Hy smyt sy towerstaf op sy bedkassie neer, ruk sy kleed af, prop dit in sy trommel en trek sy pajamas aan. Hy is moeg hiervan. Moeg om die persoon te wees na wie almal staar en oor wie almal die hele tyd skinder. As hulle net kon weet. As hulle net ’n benul kon hê van hoe dit voel om die een te wees met wie al die dinge gebeur het. . . . Mevrouw Floris weet niks, die onnosele ou vrou, dink hy ergerlik.

Hy klim in die bed en steek sy hand uit om sy gordyne toe te trek, maar Septimus sê: “Hoor hier . . . wat het daardie nag gebeur toe . . . jy weet . . . met Cedric Diggory en daai?”

Septimus klink tegelyk angstig en gretig. Dean, wat oor sy trommel buk om 'n pantoffel te soek, raak stil en Harry weet dat hy fyn luister.

"Hoekom vra jy my?" kap Harry terug. "Loop lees die *Daaglikse Profeet* soos jou liewe moeder. Dan sal jy alles weet."

"Los my ma uit, oukei!" snou Septimus.

"Ek sal niemand uitlos wat sê ek's 'n leuenaar nie," sê Harry.

"Hoe durf jy so met my praat!"

"Ek sal praat soos ek wil," sê Harry, wat sy humeur begin verloor. Hy tel sy towerstaf op. "Luister, as jy nie in dieselfde slaapsaal as ek wil wees nie, loop vra vir McGonagall om jou te skuif, dan hoef jou mammie nie te worrie –"

"Los my ma uit, Potter!"

"Wat gaan hier aan?"

Ron staan in die deur. Sy oë glip van Harry, op sy knieë op sy bed en met sy towerstaf op Septimus gerig, na Septimus wat met gebalde vuiste regstaan.

"Hy sê allerhande goed oor my ma!" skree Septimus.

"Wat?" sê Ron verbaas. "Hoekom sal Harry dit doen? Ons ken jou ma, sy's oukei . . ."

"Sy was voor sy elke woord wat die afskuwelike *Daaglikse Profeet* oor my skryf, begin glo het!" sê Harry so hard soos hy kan.

"O," sê Ron. Dit lyk of hy begin verstaan. "O . . . ek sien."

"Weet julle wat?" Septimus gee vir Harry 'n giftige kyk. "Hy is reg, ek wil nie meer in dieselfde slaapsaal as hy wees nie – hy's mal."

"Nou gaan jy te ver, Septimus," sê Ron en sy ore word rooi – altyd 'n gevaarteken.

"Te ver? Ek?" skree Septimus wat, anders as Ron, bleek geword het. "Glo jy al die gemors wat hy oor Jy-Weet-Wie sê? Glo jy hy praat die waarheid?"

"Ja, ek glo dit!" sê Ron woedend.

"Dan's jy ook mal," sê Septimus minagtend.

"O, nogal? Wel, ek is jammer vir jou, my ou, maar ek is ook 'n prefek!" Ron druk sy vinger teen sy eie bors. "En as jy nie detensie wil hê nie, moet jy jou woorde tell!"

Vir 'n paar sekondes lyk dit of Septimus reken detensie is nie te erg solank hy kan sê wat hy wil nie, maar dan draai hy met 'n minagtende snorkgeluid om, spring op sy bed en trek die gordyne met soveel geweld toe dat hulle losruk en in 'n stowwenige hoop op die vloer val.

Ron gluur na Septimus. Dan kyk hy na Dean en Neville en sê aggressief, "Het enigiemand anders se ouers 'n probleem met Harry?"

Dean haal sy skouers op. "My ma-hulle is Moggels, pël. Hulle weet niks van die mense wat by Hogwarts dood is nie, want ek's nie simpel genoeg om hulle te vertel nie."

"Jy ken nie my ma nie, sy trek alles uit jou uit!" snou Septimus. "En in elk geval, jou ma-hulle kry nie die *Daaglikse Profeet* nie. Hulle weet nie ons skoolhoof is uit die Towenaarshoërhof en die Internasionale Konfederasie vir Towenaars geskop omdat hy van sy trolle af is –"

"My ouma sê dis 'n spul twak," sê Neville pront. "Sy sê dis die *Daaglikse Profeet* wat agteruitgaan, nie Dompeldorius nie. Sy't ons koerant gekanselleer. Ons glo vir Harry." Neville klim in die bed, trek sy beddegoed tot onder sy ken op en kyk met groot oë na Septimus. "My ouma het nog altyd gesê Jy-Weet-Wie gaan eendag terugkom. Sy sê as Dompeldorius sê hy is terug, dan is hy."

Harry voel 'n gloed van dankbaarheid teenoor Neville. Niemand anders sê iets nie. Septimus haal sy towerstaf uit, maak sy gordyne reg en verdwyn daaragter. Dean klim in die bed, rol om en word stil. Neville, wat skynbaar niks meer te sê het nie, lê en kyk liefderik na sy kaktus in die maanlig.

Harry sak terug teen sy kussings terwyl Ron sy trommel begin uitpak. Die argument met Septimus het hom bitterlik ontstel. Hy het nog altyd baie van hom gehou. Hoeveel ander mense meen ook dat hy lieg of ongebalanseerd is?

Het Dompeldorius ook die hele vakansie so gevoel toe eers die Towenaarshoërhof en toe die Internasionale Konfederasie vir Towenaars hom uitgeskop het? Is dit hoekom Dompeldorius maande laas met hom, Harry, kontak gemaak het? Omdat hy kwaad is? Hulle twee was mos saam daarin. Dompeldorius het Harry geglo en sy weergawe vir die skool en die hele towenaarsgemeenskap vertel. Almal wat dink dat Harry 'n leuenaar is, moet dieselfde van Dompeldorius dink, of minstens dat Dompeldorius aan sy neus gelei word.

Op die ou end sal hulle weet ons was reg, dink Harry mistroostig toe Ron in die bed klim en die laaste kers in die slaapsaal doodblaas. Maar hoeveel ander mense gaan my nog soos Septimus voor dit gebeur, aanval?

CHAPTER TWELVE



PROFESSOR UMBRIDGE

Seamus dressed at top speed next morning and left the dormitory before Harry had even put on his socks.

“Does he think he’ll turn into a nutter if he stays in a room with me too long?” asked Harry loudly, as the hem of Seamus’s robes whipped out of sight.

“Don’t worry about it, Harry,” Dean muttered, hoisting his schoolbag onto his shoulder. “He’s just . . .” But apparently he was unable to say exactly what Seamus was, and after a slightly awkward pause followed him out of the room.

Neville and Ron both gave Harry it’s-his-problem-not-yours looks, but Harry was not much consoled. How much more of this was he going to have to take?

“What’s the matter?” asked Hermione five minutes later, catching

up with Harry and Ron halfway across the common room as they all headed toward breakfast. “You look absolutely — oh for heaven’s sake.”

She was staring at the common room notice board, where a large new sign had been put up.

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“They are the limit,” said Hermione grimly, taking down the sign, which Fred and George had pinned up over a poster giving the date of the first Hogsmeade weekend in October. “We’ll have to talk to them, Ron.”

Ron looked positively alarmed.

“Why?”

“Because we’re prefects!” said Hermione, as they climbed out through the portrait hole. “It’s up to us to stop this kind of thing!”

Ron said nothing; Harry could tell from his glum expression that the prospect of stopping Fred and George doing exactly what they liked was not one that he found inviting.

“Anyway, what’s up, Harry?” Hermione continued, as they walked

down a flight of stairs lined with portraits of old witches and wizards, all of whom ignored them, being engrossed in their own conversation. "You look really angry about something."

"Seamus reckons Harry's lying about You-Know-Who," said Ron succinctly, when Harry did not respond.

Hermione, whom Harry had expected to react angrily on his behalf, sighed.

"Yes, Lavender thinks so too," she said gloomily.

"Been having a nice little chat with her about whether or not I'm a lying, attention-seeking prat, have you?" Harry said loudly.

"No," said Hermione calmly, "I told her to keep her big fat mouth shut about you, actually. And it would be quite nice if you stopped jumping down Ron's and my throats, Harry, because if you haven't noticed, we're on your side."

There was a short pause.

"Sorry," said Harry in a low voice.

"That's quite all right," said Hermione with dignity. Then she shook her head. "Don't you remember what Dumbledore said at the end-of-term feast last year?"

Harry and Ron both looked at her blankly, and Hermione sighed again.

"About You-Know-Who. He said, '*His gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust.*'"

"How do you remember stuff like that?" asked Ron, looking at her in admiration.

"I listen, Ron," said Hermione with a touch of asperity.

“So do I, but I still couldn’t tell you exactly what —”

“The point,” Hermione pressed on loudly, “is that this sort of thing is exactly what Dumbledore was talking about. You-Know-Who’s only been back two months, and we’ve started fighting among ourselves. And the Sorting Hat’s warning was the same — stand together, be united —”

“And Harry said it last night,” retorted Ron, “if that means we’re supposed to get matey with the Slytherins, fat chance.”

“Well, I think it’s a pity we’re not trying for a bit of inter-House unity,” said Hermione crossly.

They had reached the foot of the marble staircase. A line of fourth-year Ravenclaws was crossing the entrance hall; they caught sight of Harry and hurried to form a tighter group, as though frightened he might attack stragglers.

“Yeah, we really ought to be trying to make friends with people like that,” said Harry sarcastically.

They followed the Ravenclaws into the Great Hall, looking instinctively at the staff table as they entered. Professor Grubbly-Plank was chatting to Professor Sinistra, the Astronomy teacher, and Hagrid was once again conspicuous only by his absence. The enchanted ceiling above them echoed Harry’s mood; it was a miserable rain-cloud gray.

“Dumbledore didn’t even mention how long that Grubbly-Plank woman’s staying,” he said, as they made their way across to the Gryffindor table.

“Maybe . . .” said Hermione thoughtfully.

“What?” said both Harry and Ron together.

“Well . . . maybe he didn’t want to draw attention to Hagrid not being here.”

“What d’you mean, draw attention to it?” said Ron, half laughing. “How could we not notice?”

Before Hermione could answer, a tall black girl with long, braided hair had marched up to Harry.

“Hi, Angelina.”

“Hi,” she said briskly, “good summer?” And without waiting for an answer, “Listen, I’ve been made Gryffindor Quidditch Captain.”

“Nice one,” said Harry, grinning at her; he suspected Angelina’s pep talks might not be as long-winded as Oliver Wood’s had been, which could only be an improvement.

“Yeah, well, we need a new Keeper now Oliver’s left. Tryouts are on Friday at five o’clock and I want the whole team there, all right? Then we can see how the new person’ll fit in.”

“Okay,” said Harry, and she smiled at him and departed.

“I’d forgotten Wood had left,” said Hermione vaguely, sitting down beside Ron and pulling a plate of toast toward her. “I suppose that will make quite a difference to the team?”

“I s’pose,” said Harry, taking the bench opposite. “He was a good Keeper . . .”

“Still, it won’t hurt to have some new blood, will it?” said Ron.

With a *whoosh* and a clatter, hundreds of owls came soaring in through the upper windows. They descended all over the Hall, bringing letters and packages to their owners and showering the breakfasters with droplets of water; it was clearly raining hard outside. Hedwig was nowhere to be seen, but Harry was hardly

surprised; his only correspondent was Sirius, and he doubted Sirius would have anything new to tell him after only twenty-four hours apart. Hermione, however, had to move her orange juice aside quickly to make way for a large damp barn owl bearing a sodden *Daily Prophet* in its beak.

“What are you still getting that for?” said Harry irritably, thinking of Seamus, as Hermione placed a Knut in the leather pouch on the owl’s leg and it took off again. “I’m not bothering . . . load of rubbish.”

“It’s best to know what the enemy are saying,” said Hermione darkly, and she unfurled the newspaper and disappeared behind it, not emerging until Harry and Ron had finished eating.

“Nothing,” she said simply, rolling up the newspaper and laying it down by her plate. “Nothing about you or Dumbledore or anything.”

Professor McGonagall was now moving along the table handing out schedules.

“Look at today!” groaned Ron. “History of Magic, double Potions, Divination, and double Defense Against the Dark Arts . . . Binns, Snape, Trelawney, and that Umbridge woman all in one day! I wish Fred and George’d hurry up and get those Skiving Snackboxes sorted . . .”

“Do mine ears deceive me?” said Fred, arriving with George and squeezing onto the bench beside Harry. “Hogwarts prefects surely don’t wish to skive off lessons?”

“Look what we’ve got today,” said Ron grumpily, shoving his schedule under Fred’s nose. “That’s the worst Monday I’ve ever seen.”

“Fair point, little bro,” said Fred, scanning the column. “You can have a bit of Nosebleed Nougat cheap if you like.”

“Why’s it cheap?” said Ron suspiciously.

“Because you’ll keep bleeding till you shrivel up, we haven’t got an antidote yet,” said George, helping himself to a kipper.

“Cheers,” said Ron moodily, pocketing his schedule, “but I think I’ll take the lessons.”

“And speaking of your Skiving Snackboxes,” said Hermione, eyeing Fred and George beadily, “you can’t advertise for testers on the Gryffindor notice board.”

“Says who?” said George, looking astonished.

“Says me,” said Hermione. “And Ron.”

“Leave me out of it,” said Ron hastily.

Hermione glared at him. Fred and George sniggered.

“You’ll be singing a different tune soon enough, Hermione,” said Fred, thickly buttering a crumpet. “You’re starting your fifth year, you’ll be begging us for a Snackbox before long.”

“And why would starting fifth year mean I want a Skiving Snackbox?” asked Hermione.

“Fifth year’s O.W.L. year,” said George.

“So?”

“So you’ve got your exams coming up, haven’t you? They’ll be keeping your noses so hard to that grindstone they’ll be rubbed raw,” said Fred with satisfaction.

“Half our year had minor breakdowns coming up to O.W.L.s,” said George happily. “Tears and tantrums . . . Patricia Stimpson kept

coming over faint . . .”

“Kenneth Towler came out in boils, d’you remember?” said Fred reminiscently.

“That’s ’cause you put Bulbadox Powder in his pajamas,” said George.

“Oh yeah,” said Fred, grinning. “I’d forgotten. . . . Hard to keep track sometimes, isn’t it?”

“Anyway, it’s a nightmare of a year, the fifth,” said George. “If you care about exam results anyway. Fred and I managed to keep our spirits up somehow.”

“Yeah. . . you got, what was it, three O.W.L.s each?” said Ron.

“Yep,” said Fred unconcernedly. “But we feel our futures lie outside the world of academic achievement.”

“We seriously debated whether we were going to bother coming back for our seventh year,” said George brightly, “now that we’ve got —”

He broke off at a warning look from Harry, who knew George had been about to mention the Triwizard winnings he had given them.

“— now that we’ve got our O.W.L.s,” George said hastily. “I mean, do we really need N.E.W.T.s? But we didn’t think Mum could take us leaving school early, not on top of Percy turning out to be the world’s biggest prat.”

“We’re not going to waste our last year here, though,” said Fred, looking affectionately around at the Great Hall. “We’re going to use it to do a bit of market research, find out exactly what the average Hogwarts student requires from his joke shop, carefully evaluate the results of our research, and then produce the products to fit the

demand.”

“But where are you going to get the gold to start a joke shop?” asked Hermione skeptically. “You’re going to need all the ingredients and materials — and premises too, I suppose . . .”

Harry did not look at the twins. His face felt hot; he deliberately dropped his fork and dived down to retrieve it. He heard Fred say overhead, “Ask us no questions and we’ll tell you no lies, Hermione. C’mon, George, if we get there early we might be able to sell a few Extendable Ears before Herbology.”

Harry emerged from under the table to see Fred and George walking away, each carrying a stack of toast.

“What did that mean?” said Hermione, looking from Harry to Ron. “‘Ask us no questions . . .’ Does that mean they’ve already got some gold to start a joke shop?”

“You know, I’ve been wondering about that,” said Ron, his brow furrowed. “They bought me a new set of dress robes this summer, and I couldn’t understand where they got the Galleons . . .”

Harry decided it was time to steer the conversation out of these dangerous waters.

“D’you reckon it’s true this year’s going to be really tough? Because of the exams?”

“Oh yeah,” said Ron. “Bound to be, isn’t it? O.W.L.s are really important, affect the jobs you can apply for and everything. We get career advice too, later this year, Bill told me. So you can choose what N.E.W.T.s you want to do next year.”

“D’you know what you want to do after Hogwarts?” Harry asked the other two, as they left the Great Hall shortly afterward and set off

toward their History of Magic classroom.

“Not really,” said Ron slowly. “Except . . . well . . .”

He looked slightly sheepish.

“What?” Harry urged him.

“Well, it’d be cool to be an Auror,” said Ron in an offhand voice.

“Yeah, it would,” said Harry fervently.

“But they’re, like, the elite,” said Ron. “You’ve got to be really good. What about you, Hermione?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione. “I think I’d really like to do something worthwhile.”

“An Auror’s worthwhile!” said Harry.

“Yes, it is, but it’s not the only worthwhile thing,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “I mean, if I could take S.P.E.W. further . . .”

Harry and Ron carefully avoided looking at each other.

History of Magic was by common consent the most boring subject ever devised by Wizard-kind. Professor Binns, their ghost teacher, had a wheezy, droning voice that was almost guaranteed to cause severe drowsiness within ten minutes, five in warm weather. He never varied the form of their lessons, but lectured them without pausing while they took notes, or rather, gazed sleepily into space. Harry and Ron had so far managed to scrape passes in this subject only by copying Hermione’s notes before exams; she alone seemed able to resist the soporific power of Binns’s voice.

Today they suffered three-quarters of an hour’s droning on the subject of giant wars. Harry heard just enough within the first ten minutes to appreciate dimly that in another teacher’s hands this subject might have been mildly interesting, but then his brain

disengaged, and he spent the remaining thirty-five minutes playing hangman on a corner of his parchment with Ron, while Hermione shot them filthy looks out of the corner of her eye.

“How would it be,” she asked them coldly as they left the classroom for break (Binns drifting away through the blackboard), “if I refused to lend you my notes this year?”

“We’d fail our O.W.L.s,” said Ron. “If you want that on your conscience, Hermione . . .”

“Well, you’d deserve it,” she snapped. “You don’t even try to listen to him, do you?”

“We do try,” said Ron. “We just haven’t got your brains or your memory or your concentration — you’re just cleverer than we are — is it nice to rub it in?”

“Oh, don’t give me that rubbish,” said Hermione, but she looked slightly mollified as she led the way out into the damp courtyard.

A fine misty drizzle was falling, so that the people standing in huddles around the yard looked blurred at the edges. Harry, Ron, and Hermione chose a secluded corner under a heavily dripping balcony, turning up the collars of their robes against the chilly September air and talking about what Snape was likely to set them in the first lesson of the year. They had got as far as agreeing that it was likely to be something extremely difficult, just to catch them off guard after a two-month holiday, when someone walked around the corner toward them.

“Hello, Harry!”

It was Cho Chang and what was more, she was on her own again. This was most unusual: Cho was almost always surrounded by a gang

of giggling girls, Harry remembered the agony of trying to get her by herself to ask her to the Yule Ball.

“Hi,” said Harry, feeling his face grow hot. *At least you’re not covered in Stinksap this time*, he told himself. Cho seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

“You got that stuff off, then?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, trying to grin as though the memory of their last meeting was funny as opposed to mortifying. “So did you . . . er . . . have a good summer?”

The moment he had said this he wished he hadn’t: Cedric had been Cho’s boyfriend and the memory of his death must have affected her holiday almost as badly as it had affected Harry’s. . . . Something seemed to tauten in her face, but she said, “Oh, it was all right, you know . . .”

“Is that a Tornados badge?” Ron demanded suddenly, pointing at the front of Cho’s robes, to which a sky-blue badge emblazoned with a double gold T was pinned. “You don’t support them, do you?”

“Yeah, I do,” said Cho.

“Have you always supported them, or just since they started winning the league?” said Ron, in what Harry considered an unnecessarily accusatory tone of voice.

“I’ve supported them since I was six,” said Cho coolly. “Anyway . . . see you, Harry.”

She walked away. Hermione waited until Cho was halfway across the courtyard before rounding on Ron.

“You are so tactless!”

“What? I only asked her if —”

“Couldn’t you tell she wanted to talk to Harry on her own?”

“So? She could’ve done, I wasn’t stopping —”

“What on earth were you attacking her about her Quidditch team for?”

“Attacking? I wasn’t attacking her, I was only —”

“Who *cares* if she supports the Tornados?”

“Oh, come on, half the people you see wearing those badges only bought them last season —”

“But what does it *matter*?”

“It means they’re not real fans, they’re just jumping on the bandwagon —”

“That’s the bell,” said Harry listlessly, because Ron and Hermione were bickering too loudly to hear it. They did not stop arguing all the way down to Snape’s dungeon, which gave Harry plenty of time to reflect that between Neville and Ron he would be lucky ever to have two minutes’ conversation with Cho that he could look back on without wanting to leave the country.

And yet, he thought, as they joined the queue lining up outside Snape’s classroom door, she had chosen to come and talk to him, hadn’t she? She had been Cedric’s girlfriend; she could easily have hated Harry for coming out of the Triwizard maze alive when Cedric had died, yet she was talking to him in a perfectly friendly way, not as though she thought him mad, or a liar, or in some horrible way responsible for Cedric’s death. . . . Yes, she had definitely chosen to come and talk to him, and that made the second time in two days . . . and at this thought, Harry’s spirits rose. Even the ominous sound of Snape’s dungeon door creaking open did not puncture the small,

hopeful bubble that seemed to have swelled in his chest. He filed into the classroom behind Ron and Hermione and followed them to their usual table at the back, ignoring the huffy, irritable noises now issuing from both of them.

“Settle down,” said Snape coldly, shutting the door behind him.

There was no real need for the call to order; the moment the class had heard the door close, quiet had fallen and all fidgeting stopped. Snape’s mere presence was usually enough to ensure a class’s silence.

“Before we begin today’s lesson,” said Snape, sweeping over to his desk and staring around at them all, “I think it appropriate to remind you that next June you will be sitting an important examination, during which you will prove how much you have learned about the composition and use of magical potions. Moronic though some of this class undoubtedly are, I expect you to scrape an ‘Acceptable’ in your O.W.L., or suffer my . . . displeasure.”

His gaze lingered this time upon Neville, who gulped.

“After this year, of course, many of you will cease studying with me,” Snape went on. “I take only the very best into my N.E.W.T. Potions class, which means that some of us will certainly be saying good-bye.”

His eyes rested on Harry and his lip curled. Harry glared back, feeling a grim pleasure at the idea that he would be able to give up Potions after fifth year.

“But we have another year to go before that happy moment of farewell,” said Snape softly, “so whether you are intending to attempt N.E.W.T. or not, I advise all of you to concentrate your efforts upon

maintaining the high-pass level I have come to expect from my O.W.L. students.

“Today we will be mixing a potion that often comes up at Ordinary Wizarding Level: the Draught of Peace, a potion to calm anxiety and soothe agitation. Be warned: If you are too heavy-handed with the ingredients you will put the drinker into a heavy and sometimes irreversible sleep, so you will need to pay close attention to what you are doing.” On Harry’s left, Hermione sat up a little straighter, her expression one of the utmost attentiveness. “The ingredients and method” — Snape flicked his wand — “are on the blackboard” — (they appeared there) — “you will find everything you need” — he flicked his wand again — “in the store cupboard” — (the door of the said cupboard sprang open) — “you have an hour and a half. . . . Start.”

Just as Harry, Ron, and Hermione had predicted, Snape could hardly have set them a more difficult, fiddly potion. The ingredients had to be added to the cauldron in precisely the right order and quantities; the mixture had to be stirred exactly the right number of times, firstly in clockwise, then in counterclockwise directions; the heat of the flames on which it was simmering had to be lowered to exactly the right level for a specific number of minutes before the final ingredient was added.

“A light silver vapor should now be rising from your potion,” called Snape, with ten minutes left to go.

Harry, who was sweating profusely, looked desperately around the dungeon. His own cauldron was issuing copious amounts of dark gray steam; Ron’s was spitting green sparks. Seamus was feverishly

prodding the flames at the base of his cauldron with the tip of his wand, as they had gone out. The surface of Hermione's potion, however, was a shimmering mist of silver vapor, and as Snape swept by he looked down his hooked nose at it without comment, which meant that he could find nothing to criticize. At Harry's cauldron, however, Snape stopped, looking down at Harry with a horrible smirk on his face.

"Potter, what is this supposed to be?"

The Slytherins at the front of the class all looked up eagerly; they loved hearing Snape taunt Harry.

"The Draught of Peace," said Harry tensely.

"Tell me, Potter," said Snape softly, "can you read?"

Draco Malfoy laughed.

"Yes, I can," said Harry, his fingers clenched tightly around his wand.

"Read the third line of the instructions for me, Potter."

Harry squinted at the blackboard; it was not easy to make out the instructions through the haze of multicolored steam now filling the dungeon.

"Add powdered moonstone, stir three times counterclockwise, allow to simmer for seven minutes, then add two drops of syrup of hellebore."

His heart sank. He had not added syrup of hellebore, but had proceeded straight to the fourth line of the instructions after allowing his potion to simmer for seven minutes.

"Did you do everything on the third line, Potter?"

"No," said Harry very quietly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"No," said Harry, more loudly, "I forgot the hellebore . . ."

"I know you did, Potter, which means that this mess is utterly worthless. *Evanesco*."

The contents of Harry's potion vanished; he was left standing foolishly beside an empty cauldron.

"Those of you who *have* managed to read the instructions, fill one flagon with a sample of your potion, label it clearly with your name, and bring it up to my desk for testing," said Snape. "Homework: twelve inches of parchment on the properties of moonstone and its uses in potion-making, to be handed in on Thursday."

While everyone around him filled their flagons, Harry cleared away his things, seething. His potion had been no worse than Ron's, which was now giving off a foul odor of bad eggs, or Neville's, which had achieved the consistency of just-mixed cement and which Neville was now having to gouge out of his cauldron, yet it was he, Harry, who would be receiving zero marks for the day's work. He stuffed his wand back into his bag and slumped down onto his seat, watching everyone else march up to Snape's desk with filled and corked flagons. When at long last the bell rang, Harry was first out of the dungeon and had already started his lunch by the time Ron and Hermione joined him in the Great Hall. The ceiling had turned an even murkier gray during the morning. Rain was lashing the high windows.

"That was really unfair," said Hermione consolingly, sitting down next to Harry and helping herself to shepherd's pie. "Your potion wasn't nearly as bad as Goyle's, when he put it in his flagon the

whole thing shattered and set his robes on fire.”

“Yeah, well,” said Harry, glowering at his plate, “since when has Snape ever been fair to me?”

Neither of the others answered; all three of them knew that Snape and Harry’s mutual enmity had been absolute from the moment Harry had set foot in Hogwarts.

“I did think he might be a bit better this year,” said Hermione in a disappointed voice. “I mean . . . you know . . .” She looked carefully around; there were half a dozen empty seats on either side of them and nobody was passing the table. “. . . Now he’s in the Order and everything.”

“Poisonous toadstools don’t change their spots,” said Ron sagely. “Anyway, I’ve always thought Dumbledore was cracked trusting Snape, where’s the evidence he ever really stopped working for You-Know-Who?”

“I think Dumbledore’s probably got plenty of evidence, even if he doesn’t share it with you, Ron,” snapped Hermione.

“Oh, shut up, the pair of you,” said Harry heavily, as Ron opened his mouth to argue back. Hermione and Ron both froze, looking angry and offended. “Can’t you give it a rest?” he said. “You’re always having a go at each other, it’s driving me mad.” And abandoning his shepherd’s pie, he swung his schoolbag back over his shoulder and left them sitting there.

He walked up the marble staircase two steps at a time, past the many students hurrying toward lunch. The anger that had just flared so unexpectedly still blazed inside him, and the vision of Ron and Hermione’s shocked faces afforded him a sense of deep satisfaction.

Serve them right, he thought. Why can't they give it a rest? . . . Bickering all the time . . . It's enough to drive anyone up the wall. . . .

He passed the large picture of Sir Cadogan the knight on a landing; Sir Cadogan drew his sword and brandished it fiercely at Harry, who ignored him.

“Come back, you scurvy dog, stand fast and fight!” yelled Sir Cadogan in a muffled voice from behind his visor, but Harry merely walked on, and when Sir Cadogan attempted to follow him by running into a neighboring picture, he was rebuffed by its inhabitant, a large and angry-looking wolfhound.

Harry spent the rest of the lunch hour sitting alone underneath the trapdoor at the top of North Tower, and consequently he was the first to ascend the silver ladder that led to Sybill Trelawney's classroom when the bell rang.

Divination was Harry's least favorite class after Potions, which was due mainly to Professor Trelawney's habit of predicting his premature death every few lessons. A thin woman, heavily draped in shawls and glittering with strings of beads, she always reminded Harry of some kind of insect, with her glasses hugely magnifying her eyes. She was busy putting copies of battered, leather-bound books on each of the spindly little tables with which her room was littered when Harry entered the room, but so dim was the light cast by the lamps covered by scarves and the low-burning, sickly-scented fire that she appeared not to notice him as he took a seat in the shadows. The rest of the class arrived over the next five minutes. Ron emerged from the trapdoor, looked around carefully, spotted Harry and made

directly for him, or as directly as he could while having to wend his way between tables, chairs, and overstuffed poufs.

“Hermione and me have stopped arguing,” he said, sitting down beside Harry.

“Good,” grunted Harry.

“But Hermione says she thinks it would be nice if you stopped taking out your temper on us,” said Ron.

“I’m not —”

“I’m just passing on the message,” said Ron, talking over him. “But I reckon she’s right. It’s not our fault how Seamus and Snape treat you.”

“I never said it —”

“Good day,” said Professor Trelawney in her usual misty, dreamy voice, and Harry broke off, feeling both annoyed and slightly ashamed of himself again. “And welcome back to Divination. I have, of course, been following your fortunes most carefully over the holidays, and am delighted to see that you have all returned to Hogwarts safely — as, of course, I knew you would.

“You will find on the tables before you copies of *The Dream Oracle*, by Inigo Imago. Dream interpretation is a most important means of divining the future and one that may very probably be tested in your O.W.L. Not, of course, that I believe examination passes or failures are of the remotest importance when it comes to the sacred art of divination. If you have the Seeing Eye, certificates and grades matter very little. However, the headmaster likes you to sit the examination, so . . .”

Her voice trailed away delicately, leaving them all in no doubt that

Professor Trelawney considered her subject above such sordid matters as examinations.

“Turn, please, to the introduction and read what Imago has to say on the matter of dream interpretation. Then divide into pairs. Use *The Dream Oracle* to interpret each other’s most recent dreams. Carry on.”

The one good thing to be said for this lesson was that it was not a double period. By the time they had all finished reading the introduction of the book, they had barely ten minutes left for dream interpretation. At the table next to Harry and Ron, Dean had paired up with Neville, who immediately embarked on a long-winded explanation of a nightmare involving a pair of giant scissors wearing his grandmother’s best hat; Harry and Ron merely looked at each other glumly.

“I never remember my dreams,” said Ron. “You say one.”

“You must remember one of them,” said Harry impatiently.

He was not going to share his dreams with anyone. He knew perfectly well what his regular nightmare about a graveyard meant, he did not need Ron or Professor Trelawney or the stupid *Dream Oracle* to tell him that . . .

“Well, I had one that I was playing Quidditch the other night,” said Ron, screwing up his face in an effort to remember. “What d’you reckon that means?”

“Probably that you’re going to be eaten by a giant marshmallow or something,” said Harry, turning the pages of *The Dream Oracle* without interest.

It was very dull work looking up bits of dreams in the *Oracle* and

Harry was not cheered up when Professor Trelawney set them the task of keeping a dream diary for a month as homework. When the bell went, he and Ron led the way back down the ladder, Ron grumbling loudly.

“D’you realize how much homework we’ve got already? Binns set us a foot-and-a-half-long essay on giant wars, Snape wants a foot on the use of moonstones, and now we’ve got a month’s dream diary from Trelawney! Fred and George weren’t wrong about O.W.L. year, were they? That Umbridge woman had better not give us any . . .”

When they entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom they found Professor Umbridge already seated at the teacher’s desk, wearing the fluffy pink cardigan of the night before and the black velvet bow on top of her head. Harry was again reminded forcibly of a large fly perched unwisely on top of an even larger toad.

The class was quiet as it entered the room; Professor Umbridge was, as yet, an unknown quantity and nobody knew yet how strict a disciplinarian she was likely to be.

“Well, good afternoon!” she said when finally the whole class had sat down.

A few people mumbled “Good afternoon,” in reply.

“Tut, tut,” said Professor Umbridge. “*That* won’t do, now, will it? I should like you, please, to reply ‘Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge.’ One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!”

“Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge,” they chanted back at her.

“There, now,” said Professor Umbridge sweetly. “That wasn’t too difficult, was it? Wands away and quills out, please.”

Many of the class exchanged gloomy looks; the order “wands

away” had never yet been followed by a lesson they had found interesting. Harry shoved his wand back inside his bag and pulled out quill, ink, and parchment. Professor Umbridge opened her handbag, extracted her own wand, which was an unusually short one, and tapped the blackboard sharply with it; words appeared on the board at once:

Defense Against the Dark Arts
A Return to Basic Principles

“Well now, your teaching in this subject has been rather disrupted and fragmented, hasn’t it?” stated Professor Umbridge, turning to face the class with her hands clasped neatly in front of her. “The constant changing of teachers, many of whom do not seem to have followed any Ministry-approved curriculum, has unfortunately resulted in your being far below the standard we would expect to see in your O.W.L. year.

“You will be pleased to know, however, that these problems are now to be rectified. We will be following a carefully structured, theory-centered, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic this year. Copy down the following, please.”

She rapped the blackboard again; the first message vanished and was replaced by:

Course aims:

- 1. Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic.*
- 2. Learning to recognize situations in which defensive magic can legally be used.*

3. *Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.*

For a couple of minutes the room was full of the sound of scratching quills on parchment. When everyone had copied down Professor Umbridge's three course aims she said, "Has everybody got a copy of *Defensive Magical Theory* by Wilbert Slinkhard?"

There was a dull murmur of assent throughout the class.

"I think we'll try that again," said Professor Umbridge. "When I ask you a question, I should like you to reply 'Yes, Professor Umbridge,' or 'No, Professor Umbridge.' So, has everyone got a copy of *Defensive Magical Theory* by Wilbert Slinkhard?"

"Yes, Professor Umbridge," rang through the room.

"Good," said Professor Umbridge. "I should like you to turn to page five and read chapter one, 'Basics for Beginners.' There will be no need to talk."

Professor Umbridge left the blackboard and settled herself in the chair behind the teacher's desk, observing them all with those pouchy toad's eyes. Harry turned to page five of his copy of *Defensive Magical Theory* and started to read.

It was desperately dull, quite as bad as listening to Professor Binns. He felt his concentration sliding away from him; he had soon read the same line half a dozen times without taking in more than the first few words. Several silent minutes passed. Next to him, Ron was absentmindedly turning his quill over and over in his fingers, staring at the same spot on the page. Harry looked right and received a surprise to shake him out of his torpor. Hermione had not even

opened her copy of *Defensive Magical Theory*. She was staring fixedly at Professor Umbridge with her hand in the air.

Harry could not remember Hermione ever neglecting to read when instructed to, or indeed resisting the temptation to open any book that came under her nose. He looked at her questioningly, but she merely shook her head slightly to indicate that she was not about to answer questions, and continued to stare at Professor Umbridge, who was looking just as resolutely in another direction.

After several more minutes had passed, however, Harry was not the only one watching Hermione. The chapter they had been instructed to read was so tedious that more and more people were choosing to watch Hermione's mute attempt to catch Professor Umbridge's eye than to struggle on with "Basics for Beginners."

When more than half the class were staring at Hermione rather than at their books, Professor Umbridge seemed to decide that she could ignore the situation no longer.

"Did you want to ask something about the chapter, dear?" she asked Hermione, as though she had only just noticed her.

"Not about the chapter, no," said Hermione.

"Well, we're reading just now," said Professor Umbridge, showing her small, pointed teeth. "If you have other queries we can deal with them at the end of class."

"I've got a query about your course aims," said Hermione.

Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows.

"And your name is — ?"

"Hermione Granger," said Hermione.

"Well, Miss Granger, I think the course aims are perfectly clear if

you read them through carefully,” said Professor Umbridge in a voice of determined sweetness.

“Well, I don’t,” said Hermione bluntly. “There’s nothing written up there about *using* defensive spells.”

There was a short silence in which many members of the class turned their heads to frown at the three course aims still written on the blackboard.

“*Using* defensive spells?” Professor Umbridge repeated with a little laugh. “Why, I can’t imagine any situation arising in my classroom that would require you to *use* a defensive spell, Miss Granger. You surely aren’t expecting to be attacked during class?”

“We’re not going to use magic?” Ron ejaculated loudly.

“Students raise their hands when they wish to speak in my class, Mr. — ?”

“Weasley,” said Ron, thrusting his hand into the air.

Professor Umbridge, smiling still more widely, turned her back on him. Harry and Hermione immediately raised their hands too. Professor Umbridge’s pouchy eyes lingered on Harry for a moment before she addressed Hermione.

“Yes, Miss Granger? You wanted to ask something else?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “Surely the whole point of Defense Against the Dark Arts is to practice defensive spells?”

“Are you a Ministry-trained educational expert, Miss Granger?” asked Professor Umbridge in her falsely sweet voice.

“No, but —”

“Well then, I’m afraid you are not qualified to decide what the ‘whole point’ of any class is. Wizards much older and cleverer than

you have devised our new program of study. You will be learning about defensive spells in a secure, risk-free way —”

“What use is that?” said Harry loudly. “If we’re going to be attacked it won’t be in a —”

“*Hand*, Mr. Potter!” sang Professor Umbridge.

Harry thrust his fist in the air. Professor Umbridge promptly turned away from him again, but now several other people had their hands up too.

“And your name is?” Professor Umbridge said to Dean.

“Dean Thomas.”

“Well, Mr. Thomas?”

“Well, it’s like Harry said, isn’t it?” said Dean. “If we’re going to be attacked, it won’t be risk-free —”

“I repeat,” said Professor Umbridge, smiling in a very irritating fashion at Dean, “do you expect to be attacked during my classes?”

“No, but —”

Professor Umbridge talked over him.

“I do not wish to criticize the way things have been run in this school,” she said, an unconvincing smile stretching her wide mouth, “but you have been exposed to some very irresponsible wizards in this class, very irresponsible indeed — not to mention,” she gave a nasty little laugh, “extremely dangerous half-breeds.”

“If you mean Professor Lupin,” piped up Dean Thomas angrily, “he was the best we ever —”

“*Hand*, Mr. Thomas! As I was saying — you have been introduced to spells that have been complex, inappropriate to your age group, and potentially lethal. You have been frightened into believing that

you are likely to meet Dark attacks every other day —”

“No we haven’t,” Hermione said, “we just —”

“Your hand is not up, Miss Granger!”

Hermione put up her hand; Professor Umbridge turned away from her.

“It is my understanding that my predecessor not only performed illegal curses in front of you, he actually performed them *on* you —”

“Well, he turned out to be a maniac, didn’t he?” said Dean Thomas hotly. “Mind you, we still learned loads —”

“Your hand is not up, Mr. Thomas!” trilled Professor Umbridge.

“Now, it is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about. And your name is?” she added, staring at Parvati, whose hand had just shot up.

“Parvati Patil, and isn’t there a practical bit in our Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L.? Aren’t we supposed to show that we can actually do the countercurses and things?”

“As long as you have studied the theory hard enough, there is no reason why you should not be able to perform the spells under carefully controlled examination conditions,” said Professor Umbridge dismissively.

“Without ever practicing them before?” said Parvati incredulously. “Are you telling us that the first time we’ll get to do the spells will be during our exam?”

“I repeat, as long as you have studied the theory hard enough —”

“And what good’s theory going to be in the real world?” said Harry loudly, his fist in the air again.

Professor Umbridge looked up.

"This is school, Mr. Potter, not the real world," she said softly.

"So we're not supposed to be prepared for what's waiting out there?"

"There is nothing waiting out there, Mr. Potter."

"Oh yeah?" said Harry. His temper, which seemed to have been bubbling just beneath the surface all day, was reaching boiling point.

"Who do you imagine wants to attack children like yourselves?" inquired Professor Umbridge in a horribly honeyed voice.

"Hmm, let's think . . ." said Harry in a mock thoughtful voice, "maybe *Lord Voldemort*?"

Ron gasped; Lavender Brown uttered a little scream; Neville slipped sideways off his stool. Professor Umbridge, however, did not flinch. She was staring at Harry with a grimly satisfied expression on her face.

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter."

The classroom was silent and still. Everyone was staring at either Umbridge or Harry.

"Now, let me make a few things quite plain."

Professor Umbridge stood up and leaned toward them, her stubby-fingered hands splayed on her desk.

"You have been told that a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead —"

"He wasn't dead," said Harry angrily, "but yeah, he's returned!"

"Mr.-Potter-you-have-already-lost-your-House-ten-points-do-not-make-matters-worse-for-yourself," said Professor Umbridge in one

breath without looking at him. "As I was saying, you have been informed that a certain Dark wizard is at large once again. *This is a lie.*"

"It is NOT a lie!" said Harry. "I saw him, I fought him!"

"Detention, Mr. Potter!" said Professor Umbridge triumphantly. "Tomorrow evening. Five o'clock. My office. I repeat, *this is a lie.* The Ministry of Magic guarantees that you are not in danger from any Dark wizard. If you are still worried, by all means come and see me outside class hours. If someone is alarming you with fibs about reborn Dark wizards, I would like to hear about it. I am here to help. I am your friend. And now, you will kindly continue your reading. Page five, 'Basics for Beginners.'"

Professor Umbridge sat down behind her desk again. Harry, however, stood up. Everyone was staring at him; Seamus looked half-scared, half-fascinated.

"Harry, no!" Hermione whispered in a warning voice, tugging at his sleeve, but Harry jerked his arm out of her reach.

"So, according to you, Cedric Diggory dropped dead of his own accord, did he?" Harry asked, his voice shaking.

There was a collective intake of breath from the class, for none of them, apart from Ron and Hermione, had ever heard Harry talk about what had happened on the night that Cedric had died. They stared avidly from Harry to Professor Umbridge, who had raised her eyes and was staring at him without a trace of a fake smile on her face.

"Cedric Diggory's death was a tragic accident," she said coldly.

"It was murder," said Harry. He could feel himself shaking. He had hardly talked to anyone about this, least of all thirty eagerly

listening classmates. "Voldemort killed him, and you know it."

Professor Umbridge's face was quite blank. For a moment he thought she was going to scream at him. Then she said, in her softest, most sweetly girlish voice, "Come here, Mr. Potter, dear."

He kicked his chair aside, strode around Ron and Hermione and up to the teacher's desk. He could feel the rest of the class holding its breath. He felt so angry he did not care what happened next.

Professor Umbridge pulled a small roll of pink parchment out of her handbag, stretched it out on the desk, dipped her quill into a bottle of ink, and started scribbling, hunched over so that Harry could not see what she was writing. Nobody spoke. After a minute or so she rolled up the parchment and tapped it with her wand; it sealed itself seamlessly so that he could not open it.

"Take this to Professor McGonagall, dear," said Professor Umbridge, holding out the note to him.

He took it from her without saying a word and left the room, not even looking back at Ron and Hermione, and slamming the classroom door shut behind him. He walked very fast along the corridor, the note to McGonagall clutched tight in his hand, and turning a corner walked slap into Peeves the Poltergeist, a wide-faced little man floating on his back in midair, juggling several inkwells.

"Why, it's Potty Wee Potter!" cackled Peeves, allowing two of the inkwells to fall to the ground where they smashed and splattered the walls with ink; Harry jumped backward out of the way with a snarl.

"Get out of it, Peeves."

"Oooh, Crackpot's feeling cranky," said Peeves, pursuing Harry along the corridor, leering as he zoomed along above him. "What is it

this time, my fine Potty friend? Hearing voices? Seeing visions? Speaking in” — Peeves blew a gigantic raspberry — “tongues?”

“I said, leave me ALONE!” Harry shouted, running down the nearest flight of stairs, but Peeves merely slid down the banister on his back beside him

*“Oh, most think he’s barking, the Potty wee lad,
But some are more kindly and think he’s just sad,
But Peevesy knows better and says that he’s mad —”*

“SHUT UP!”

A door to his left flew open and Professor McGonagall emerged from her office looking grim and slightly harassed.

“What on *earth* are you shouting about, Potter?” she snapped, as Peeves cackled gleefully and zoomed out of sight. “Why aren’t you in class?”

“I’ve been sent to see you,” said Harry stiffly.

“Sent? What do you mean, sent?”

He held out the note from Professor Umbridge. Professor McGonagall took it from him, frowning, slit it open with a tap of her wand, stretched it out, and began to read. Her eyes zoomed from side to side behind their square spectacles as she read what Umbridge had written, and with each line they became narrower.

“Come in here, Potter.”

He followed her inside her study. The door closed automatically behind him.

“Well?” said Professor McGonagall, rounding on him. “Is this

true?"

"Is what true?" Harry asked, rather more aggressively than he had intended. "Professor?" he added in an attempt to sound more polite.

"Is it true that you shouted at Professor Umbridge?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"You called her a liar?"

"Yes."

"You told her He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back?"

"Yes."

Professor McGonagall sat down behind her desk, frowning at Harry. Then she said, "Have a biscuit, Potter."

"Have — what?"

"Have a biscuit," she repeated impatiently, indicating a tartan tin of cookies lying on top of one of the piles of papers on her desk. "And sit down."

There had been a previous occasion when Harry, expecting to be caned by Professor McGonagall, had instead been appointed by her to the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He sank into a chair opposite her and helped himself to a Ginger Newt, feeling just as confused and wrong-footed as he had done on that occasion.

Professor McGonagall set down Professor Umbridge's note and looked very seriously at Harry.

"Potter, you need to be careful."

Harry swallowed his mouthful of Ginger Newt and stared at her. Her tone of voice was not at all what he was used to; it was not brisk, crisp, and stern; it was low and anxious and somehow much

more human than usual.

“Misbehavior in Dolores Umbridge’s class could cost you much more than House points and a detention.”

“What do you — ?”

“Potter, use your common sense,” snapped Professor McGonagall, with an abrupt return to her usual manner. “You know where she comes from, you must know to whom she is reporting.”

The bell rang for the end of the lesson. Overhead and all around came the elephantine sounds of hundreds of students on the move.

“It says here she’s given you detention every evening this week, starting tomorrow,” Professor McGonagall said, looking down at Umbridge’s note again.

“Every evening this week!” Harry repeated, horrified. “But, Professor, couldn’t you — ?”

“No, I couldn’t,” said Professor McGonagall flatly.

“But —”

“She is your teacher and has every right to give you detention. You will go to her room at five o’clock tomorrow for the first one. Just remember: Tread carefully around Dolores Umbridge.”

“But I was telling the truth!” said Harry, outraged. “Voldemort’s back, you know he is, Professor Dumbledore knows he is —”

“For heaven’s sake, Potter!” said Professor McGonagall, straightening her glasses angrily (she had winced horribly when he had used Voldemort’s name). “Do you really think this is about truth or lies? It’s about keeping your head down and your temper under control!”

She stood up, nostrils wide and mouth very thin, and he stood too.

“Have another biscuit,” she said irritably, thrusting the tin at him.

“No, thanks,” said Harry coldly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she snapped.

He took one.

“Thanks,” he said grudgingly.

“Didn’t you listen to Dolores Umbridge’s speech at the start-of-term feast, Potter?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Yeah . . . she said . . . progress will be prohibited or . . . well, it meant that . . . that the Ministry of Magic is trying to interfere at Hogwarts.”

Professor McGonagall eyed him for a moment, then sniffed, walked around her desk, and held open the door for him.

“Well, I’m glad you listen to Hermione Granger at any rate,” she said, pointing him out of her office.

Professor Umbridge

Die volgende oggend trek Septimus blitsvinnig aan en maak hom uit die voete voor Harry eens sy sokkies aanhet.

“Dink hy hy gaan mal word as hy te lank saam met my in dieselfde kamer is?” vra Harry hard toe die soom van Septimus se kleed om die hoek verdwyn.

“Moenie daaroor worrie nie, Harry,” brom Dean. Hy haak sy skooltas oor sy skouer. “Hy’s net . . .”

Maar hy kan skynbaar nie presies sê wat Septimus is nie en ná ’n ongemaklike stilte stap hy ook uit.

Neville en Ron kyk albei na Harry met uitdrukkings wat sê dissy-probleem-en-nie-joune-nie, maar dit troos Harry nie juis nie. Hoeveel hiervan sal hy nog moet verduur?

“Wat makeer?” vra Hermien ’n paar minute later toe sy vir Harry en Ron inhaal op pad eetsaal toe. “Julle lyk absoluut – ag, genadetjie tog!”

Sy staar na die geselskamer se kennisgewingbord waarteen ’n groot nuwe kennisgewing opgesit is.

SAKKE VOL GALJOENE!

Raak jou sakgeld te gou op?

Wil jy graag ekstra goud verdien?

*Kontak Fred en George Weasley, Griffindor-geselskamer,
vir maklike, deelydse, so te sê pynlose takies.*

(Neem kennis dat deelname op eie risiko geskied.)

“Dis te erg,” sê Hermien en skeur die kennisgewing af. Fred en George het dit bo-oor ’n plakkaat geplak waarop die datum vir die eerste Hogsmeade-naweek in Oktober staan. “Ons sal met hulle moet praat, Ron.”

Ron lyk heeltemal uit die veld geslaan.

“Hoekom?”

“Omdat ons prefekte is!” sê Hermien terwyl hulle deur die portretopening klim. “Ons kan nie hierdie soort ding toelaat nie!”

Ron sê niks. Harry kan aan sy stuurs uitdrukking sien dat hy glad nie daarna uitsien om vir Fred en George te probeer keer as hulle besluit het om iets te doen nie.

"In elk geval, wat's fout, Harry?" vra Hermien terwyl hulle met 'n stel trappe afstap waar portrette van ou hekse en towenaars in druk gesprek teen die mure hang. "Jy lyk baie omgekrap oor iets."

"Septimus reken Harry lieg oor Jy-Weet-Wie," sê Ron kortaf toe Harry nie antwoord nie.

Harry het verwag dat Hermien hom verwoed sal verdedig, maar sy sug bloot.

"Hm, Hildegard dink ook so," sê sy bedruk.

"Lekker met haar geskinder oor hoe 'n groot aandagsoeker en leuenaar ek is, nè?" sê Harry hard.

"Nee," sê Hermien kalm. "Ek het vir haar gesê om haar groot vet snater te hou. En dit sal nogal gaaf wees as jy sal ophou om in ons kele af te spring, Harry, want ingeval jy nie agtergekom het nie, ek en Ron is aan jou kant."

Daar is 'n kort stilte.

"Jammer," sê Harry skor.

"Dis oukei," sê Hermien met groot waardigheid. Dan skud sy haar kop. "Onthou julle wat Dompeldorius aan die einde van verlede kwartaal tydens die fees gesê het?"

Harry en Ron kyk uitdrukkingloos na haar en sy sug weer.

"Oor Jy-Weet-Wie. Hy't gesê sy 'gawe om onmin te saai, is baie groot en ons kan net daarteen stry as ons 'n ewe sterk band van vriendskap en vertroue het' –"

Ron kyk bewonderend na haar. "Hoe onthou jy sulke goed?"

"Ek luister, Ron," sê Hermien skerp.

"Ek ook, maar ek kan nie vir jou presies sê wat –"

"Die punt," gaan Hermien voort, "is dat hierdie soort ding presies is waarvan Dompeldorius gepraat het. Jy-Weet-Wie is nog net twee maande lank terug en ons baklei al klaar met mekaar. En die Sorteeroed het dieselfde waarskuwing gegee: staan saam, wees verenig –"

"En Harry was ook gisteraand reg," kap Ron terug. "As hulle wil hê ons moet met die Slibberins maatjies wees – vergeet dit."

"Wel, ek dink dis 'n jammerte dat die huise nie eens probeer saamwerk nie," sê Hermien vererg.

Hulle is aan die voet van die marmertrappe. 'n Ry Raweklou-studente in hul vierde jaar stap deur die ingangsportaal, sien vir Harry en drom skielik saam asof hulle bang is hy sal iemand aanval.

"Ja, ons moet regtig hard probeer om met sulke mense maats te maak," sê Harry sarkasties.

Hulle volg die Raweklou-studente na die Groot Saal. Al drie kyk instinktief na die personeeltafel toe hulle instap. Professor Growweblaar gesels met professor Sinistra, die Sterrekunde-onderwyser. Hagrid skitter nog steeds in sy afwesigheid. Die betowerde plafon bo hulle weerspieël Harry se gemoed: dis 'n mistroostige reëngrys kleur.

"Dompeldorius het nie eens gesê hoe lank daardie Growweblaar-vroumens gaan bly nie," sê hy terwyl hulle na die Griffindor-tafel stap.

"Dalk . . ." sê Hermien ingedagte.

"Wat?" sê Harry en Ron tegelyk.

"Wel . . . dalk wil hy nie almal se aandag daarop vestig dat Hagrid nie hier is nie."

"Wat bedoel jy met 'aandag daarop vestig'?" sê Ron met 'n laggie. "Hoe kan 'n mens dit nie raak sien nie?"

Voor Hermien kan antwoord, kom 'n lang swart meisie met stringe donker vlegseltjies haastig na Harry aangestap.

"Hallo, Angelina."

"Hallo," sê sy saaklik. "Lekker vakansie gehou?" Sy wag nie vir 'n antwoord nie. "Hoor hier, ek is aangestel as Griffindor se Kwiddiek-kaptein."

"Klink goed," sê Harry en grinnik vir haar. Hy vermoed dat Angelina se spanpraatjies nie so langdradig soos Oliver Wood s'n sal wees nie, wat net 'n verbetering kan wees.

"Ja, wel, ons moet 'n nuwe Wagter kry noudat Oliver weg is. Die proewe word Vrydag om vyfuur gehou en ek wil die hele span daar hê sodat ons kan sien hoe die nuwe persoon impas."

"Oukei," sê Harry.

Angelina glimlag vir hom en stap weg.

"Ek het vergeet dat Wood weg is," sê Hermien afgetrokke toe sy langs Ron gaan sit en 'n bord vol roosterbrood nader trek. "Dit maak seker nogal 'n verskil aan die span."

"Ek sou so dink," sê Harry en gaan sit op die bank oorkant haar. "Hy was 'n goeie Wagter."

"Maar nuwe bloed sal seker nie kwaad doen nie, of hoe?" sê Ron.

Met 'n whoesj en 'n geklater seil honderde uile op daardie oomblik deur die boonste vensters en spat almal nat terwyl hulle met briewe en pakkies vir hul eienaars deur die Saal vlieg. Dis duidelik dat dit hard reën buite. Hedwig is nie daar nie, maar dis nie vir Harry vreemd nie. Dis net Sirius wat vir hom skryf en hy twyfel of Sirius na skaars vier-en-twintig uur enige nuus sal hê. Hermien stoot egter haar lemoensap vinnig eenkant toe om plek te maak vir 'n nat non-netjiesuil met 'n deurweekte *Daaglikse Profeet* in sy snawel.

"Hoekom kry jy dit nog steeds?" sê Harry vies en dink aan Septimus toe Hermien 'n Knoet in die leersakkie aan die uil se been sit voor dit wegvlieg. "Ek doen nie meer die moeite nie . . . spul gemors."

"Dis goed om te weet wat die vyand sê." Hermien vou die koerant oop, verdwyn agter die bladsye en kom eers weer te voorskyn toe Harry en Ron klaar geëet het.

"Niks," sê sy bloot, rol die koerant op en sit dit langs haar bord neer. "Niks oor jou of Dompeldorius of enigiets anders nie."

Professor McGonagall stap langs die tafel af en deel roosters uit.

"Kyk na vandag!" kreun Ron. "Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns, dubbele Towerdrankies, Waarsêery en dubbele Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste . . . Binns, Snerp, Trelawney en daardie Umbridge-vroumens almal op een dag! Ek wens Fred en George wil opskud met daardie Stokkiesdraaisnoepies . . ."

"Het ek reg gehoor?" sê Fred, wat pas saam met George gearriveer het. Hulle gaan sit op die bank langs Harry. "Hogwarts-prefekte wil darem seker nie stokkiesdraai nie, of hoe?"

"Kyk wat het ons vandag," sê Ron nors en druk sy rooster onder Fred se neus. "Dis die ergste Maandag wat ek nog ooit gesien het."

"Ek sien, kleinboet," sê Fred terwyl hy na die rooster kyk. "Hm, jy kan altyd 'n stukkie Neusbloei-nougat goedkoop kry as jy belangstel."

"Hoekom is dit goedkoop?" vra Ron agterdogtig.

"Omdat jy sal bloei tot jy opgekrimp is. Ons het nog nie 'n teenmiddel nie," sê George en skep vir hom spek en eiers.

"Nee dankie," sê Ron stuurs en steek sy rooster in sy sak. "Ek gaan eerder klas toe."

"Gepraat van Stokkiesdraaisnoepies." Hermien kyk kwaai na Fred en George. "Julle kan nie op die Griffindor-kennisgewingbord vir proefkonyne adverteer nie."

"Sê wie?" sê George verbaas.

"Sê ek," sê Hermien. "En Ron."

"Los my hier uit," sê Ron vinnig.

Hermien gluur na hom. Fred en George giggel.

"Jy sal gou genoeg 'n ander deuntjie sing, Hermien," sê Fred terwyl hy 'n plaatkoekie dik met botter smeer. "Jy's aan die begin van jou vyfde jaar. Jy sal ons een van die dae kom smeeek vir Snoepies."

"En hoekom sal ek 'n Stokkiesdraaisnoepie wil hê net omdat ek in my vyfde jaar is?" vra Hermien.

"Vyfde jaar is UIL-jaar," sê George betekenisvol.

"So?"

"So dis eksamens! Hulle gaan jou skouertjies so hard teen daardie

wiel druk, jy sal rou geskaaf wees," sê Fred met smaak.

"Die helfte van ons jaar het kort voor die UILE inmeekaargestort," sê George vrolik. "Trane en aanvalle . . . Patricia Stimpson het die hele tyd flou geword . . ."

"Kenneth Towler het sulke groot swere gekry, onthou jy?" sê Fred nostalgies.

"Dit was die Knolpoeier wat jy in sy pajamas gesit het," sê George.

"O ja, ek het vergeet," grinnik Fred. "Ek hou ook nie altyd by nie . . ."

"In elk geval, jou vyfde jaar is 'n nagmerrie," sê George. "Wel, dis nou as jy oor eksamenuitslae gepla is. Fred en ek het darem so op 'n manier deurgeskraap."

"Ja, julle het . . . wat nou weer, drie UILE elk gekry?" sê Ron.

"Jip," sê Fred onbesorg. "Maar ons het gevoel ons toekoms lê buite die wêreld van akademiese prestasie."

"Ons moes mooi dink of dit die moeite werd is om terug te kom vir ons sewende jaar," sê George opgewek, "nadat ons die —"

Hy bly stil toe Harry, wat net betyds besef het George is op die punt om alles uit te blaker oor die Drietowenaarsprysgeld, waar-skuwend na hom kyk.

"— noudat ons ons UILE het," sê George vinnig. "Ek bedoel, wat moet ons miskien met OTTe maak? Maar toe dink ons Ma sal nie daarvan hou as ons vroeg uit die skool gaan nie, veral nie noudat Percy die slagpat van die wêreld is nie."

"Maar ons gaan ook nie ons laaste jaar hier mors nie," sê Fred en kyk waarderend deur die Groot Saal. "Ons gaan marknavorsing doen, uitvind presies wat die gemiddelde Hogwarts-student van 'n grapwinkel verwag, die resultate van ons navorsing evalueer en die produkte lewer wat die vraag sal aanspreek."

"Maar waar gaan julle genoeg goud kry om 'n grapwinkel te begin?" vra Hermien skepties. "Julle moet bestanddele en materiaal hê, en 'n perseel —"

Harry waag dit nie om na die tweeling te kyk nie. Sy gesig voel warm. Hy laat sy vurk met opset val en duik af om dit te soek. Hy hoor hoe Fred sê: "Vra geen vrae en hoor geen leuens nie, Hermien. Komaan, George, as ons gou maak, kan ons dalk nog 'n paar Verlengbare Ore voor Herbologie verkoop."

Harry verskyn van onder die tafel en sien hoe Fred en George wegstap, elkeen met 'n hele stapel roosterbrood.

"Wat het hy daarmee bedoel?" Hermien kyk van Harry na Ron. "Vra geen vrae nie . . ." Beteken dit hulle het reeds die goud om 'n grapwinkel mee te begin?"

"Weet jy, ek het ook al daaroor gewonder," sê Ron met 'n frons. "Hulle het die afgelope vakansie vir my 'n nuwe aandkleed gekoop en ek kan glad nie verstaan waar hulle die Galjoene . . ."

Harry besluit dis tyd om die gesprek in 'n veiliger rigting te stuur.

"Dink julle dis waar dat vanjaar so verskriklik erg gaan wees? Oor die eksamens?"

"O ja," sê Ron. "Beslis. Uile is baie belangrik as jy aansoek doen vir werk en alles. Bill het vir my gesê ons gaan later vanjaar loopbaanadvies kry. Sodat jy kan kies watter OTTe jy volgende jaar wil doen."

"Weet julle al wat julle ná Hogwarts gaan doen?" vra Harry vir die ander twee toe hulle 'n rukkie later uit die Groot Saal na die Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns-klas stap.

"Nie eintlik nie," sê Ron stadig. "Behalwe . . . wel . . ."

Hy lyk effens skaam.

"Wat?" moedig Harry hom aan.

"Wel, dit sal cool wees om 'n Auror te wees," sê Ron in 'n ongeërgde stem.

"Ja, dit sal nogal," stem Harry saam.

"Maar hulle is soos in die elite," sê Ron. "Jy moet regtig goed wees. Wat van jou, Hermien?"

"Ek weet nie," sê sy. "Ek dink ek wil iets doen wat die moeite werd is."

"'n Auror is die moeite werd!" sê Harry.

"Ja, dit is, maar dis nie al wat die moeite werd is nie," sê Hermien ingedagte. "Ek bedoel, ek kan SPOEG verder voer . . ."

Harry en Ron kyk liewer nie na mekaar nie.

Almal stem saam dat Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns die verveligste vak is wat nog ooit deur die towergemeenskap bedink is. Professor Binns, hul spookonderwyser, het 'n aamborstige dreunstem wat jou binne tien sekondes lomerig maak, vyf as die weer warm is. Hy verander nooit die vorm van sy lesse nie, maar praat onverstoord terwyl hulle aantekeninge maak, of liewer, skaapagtig in die niet staar. Harry en Ron het nog elke jaar deureskraap hoofsaaklik omdat hulle Hermien se aantekeninge afskryf. Sy is al een wat nie deur Binns se stem aan die slaap gesus word nie.

Vandag moet hulle vir 'n uur en 'n half na sy gedreun oor die reuse se oorloë luister. Harry hoor net genoeg tydens die eerste tien minute om te besef dat 'n ander onderwyser die onderwerp dalk tog interessant sou kon aanbied. Toe skakel sy brein af en vir die res van die tyd speel hy en Ron hangman op 'n hoek van sy perkament, terwyl Hermien hulle onderlangs vuil kyke gee.

“Wat sal gebeur,” sê sy kil toe hulle uitstap vir pouse (Binns het weggedryf deur die swartbord), “as ek aan die einde van die jaar weer om my aantekeninge vir julle te gee?”

“Ons sal ons ULe druipe,” sê Ron. “As jy dit op jou gewete wil hê, Hermien . . .”

“Wel, dit sal julle verdiende loon wees,” snou Hermien. “Julle probeer nie eens luister nie!”

“Ons probeer,” sê Ron. “Maar ons het nie jou brein en jou geheue en jou konsentrasie nie – jy’s net soveel slimmer as ons – is dit lekker om dit in te vryf?”

“Moenie daardie twak vir my vertel nie,” sê Hermien, maar sy lyk nogal in haar skik terwyl sy vooruit na die nat binnehof stap.

’n Fyn motreën val, sodat die studente wat in groepies aan die kante van die binnehof staan effens wasig lyk. Harry, Ron en Hermien kry ’n beskutte hoekie onder ’n druppende balkon, slaan hul klede se krae op teen die koue Septemberlug en gesels oor wat hulle dink Snorp hulle tydens die eerste les van die jaar gaan gee. Hulle het net besluit dat dit iets baie moeiliks gaan wees om hulle na ’n vakansie van twee maande uit te vang, toe iemand om die hoek kom.

“Hallo, Harry!”

Dis Cho Chang, en sy is weer alleen. Dis baie ongewoon: Cho is feitlik altyd omring deur ’n klomp giggelende vriendinne. Harry onthou hoe swaar dit was om haar alleen te kry sodat hy haar vir die Kersbal kon vra.

“Hallo,” sê Harry en voel hoe sy gesig warm word. *Ten minste is jy nie hierdie keer vol Stinksap nie*, sê hy vir homself. Dit lyk of Cho ook daaraan dink.

“So, julle het daardie goed darem afgekry?”

“Ja,” sê Harry en probeer glimlag asof die herinnering aan hul vorige ontmoeting eerder snaaks as vernederend was. “So, het jy . . . hm . . . lekker vakansie gehou?”

Die oomblik toe hy dit sê, wens hy hy het nie. Cedric was Cho se kêrel en gedagtes aan sy dood het haar vakansie seker net so erg soos Harry s’n bederf. Dis of haar gesig strak word, maar dan sê sy: “Ja, dit was oukei, wat . . .”

“Is dit die Tornado’s se wapen?” vra Ron skielik en wys na die voorkant van Cho se kleed waarteen ’n hemelsblou wapen versier met ’n dubbele goue “T” vasgesteek is. “Skree jy vir hulle?”

“Ja, hoekom?” sê Cho.

“Het jy nog altyd vir hulle geskree of net vandat hulle die liga begin wen het?”

Harry meen Ron se stem hoef glad nie so beskuldigend te wees nie.

"Ek ondersteun hulle al vandat ek ses is," sê Cho koel. "Oukei dan . . . sien jou, Harry."

Sy stap weg. Hermien wag tot Cho halfpad oor die binnehof is voor sy vir Ron invlieg.

"Jy is so taktloos!"

"Wat? Ek het net vir haar gevra of –"

"Kon jy nie sien sy wou alleen met Harry praat nie?"

"So? Hoekom het sy nie? Ek het haar nie gekeer nie –"

"Hoekom val jy haar oor haar Kwiddieksplan aan?"

"Aanval? Ek het haar nie aangeval nie, ek het net –"

"Wat maak dit saak of sy die Tornado's ondersteun of nie?"

"Komaan, die helfte van die mense met daardie wapens het dit verlede seisoen gekoop –"

"Maar wat daarvan?"

"Dit beteken hulle is nie ware ondersteuners nie, hulle gaan net saam met die stroom –"

"Daar lui die klok," sê Harry stroef. Ron en Hermien baklei te hard om enigiets te hoor. Hulle stry die hele ent pad tot by Snerp se kerker. Harry sug. Met Neville en Ron in die rondte sal hy gelukkig wees om ooit 'n gesprek van selfs twee minute met Cho te kan hê waaraan hy nie sal terugdink sonder om te wens hy kan die land verlaat nie.

En tog, dink Harry toe hy in die ry voor Snerp se klaskamer staan, het sy elke keer uit haar eie met hom kom praat. Sy was Cedric se meisie, sy kon hom maklik gehaat het omdat hy lewend uit die Drietowenaarsdoolhof gekom het terwyl Cedric dood is. Maar sy is nogtans vriendelik en maak nie asof hy mal is of 'n leuenaar wat op die een of ander aaklige manier vir Cedric se dood verantwoordelik is nie . . . nee, sy het vir die tweede keer in twee dae uit haar eie met hom kom praat. Hierdie gedagte laat Harry dadelik beter voel. Selfs toe Snerp se kerkerdeur krakend oopgaan, breek dié onheilspellende geluid nie die klein, hoopvolle borrel wat in sy bors begin swel het nie. Hy volg Ron en Hermien na hul gewone tafel agter in die klas, gaan sit tussen hulle en doen sy bes om hul ergerlike gebrom te ignoreer.

"Kom tot bedaring," sê Snerp koud en maak die deur agter hom toe.

Dis nie regtig nodig om hulle tot orde te roep nie. Die oomblik toe die klas se deur toegaan, bly almal stil. Niemand kriel meer nie. Snerp se blote teenwoordigheid is gewoonlik genoeg om te verseker dat 'n klas stil is.

“Voor ons met vandag se les begin,” sê Snerp terwyl hy na sy lessenaar swiep, “dink ek dit is gepas om julle daaraan te herinner dat ’n belangrike eksamen in Junie op julle wag. Julle sal moet verslag doen oor wat julle oor die samestelling en gebruik van towerdrankies geleer het. Hoewel sommige van julle sonder twyfel morone is, verwag ek dat julle minstens ’n ‘Aanvaarbaar’ vir jul UIL sal behaal. So nie sal julle . . . my ontevredenheid moet verduur.”

Sy blik rus ’n oomblik op Neville, wat swaar sluk.

“Ná vanjaar sal baie van julle nie meer by my klasloop nie,” gaan Snerp voort. “Ek aanvaar net die heel bestes vir my OTTe-towerdrankieklas, wat beteken dat sommige van julle ons beslis sal verlaat.”

Sy blik rus op Harry en sy lip krul. Harry gluur terug, tog te dankbaar dat hy Towerdrankies ná sy vyfde jaar kan staak.

“Maar daar is nog ’n volle jaar voor daardie heuglike oomblik wanneer ons mekaar sal groet,” sê Snerp sag, “dus raai ek julle aan, of julle nou die OTTe gaan aanpak of nie, om te sorg dat die hoë slaagsyfer wat ek van my UIL-studente verwag, gehandhaaf word.

“Vandag gaan ons ’n drankie meng wat dikwels op UILe-vlak voorkom: die Vredesdrank, ’n towerdrankie vir die beheer van angs en aggressie. Maar wees gewaarsku: as jy nalatig met die hoeveel-hede is, kan jy die drinker in ’n diep en selfs onomkeerbare slaap dompel. Let dus goed op na wat julle doen.” Hermien, aan Harry se linkerkant, sit effens regopper, ’n uitdrukking van gespanne aandag op haar gesig. “Die bestanddele en die metode –” Snerp waai sy towerstaf, “– is op die skryfbord –” (hulle verskyn) “– julle sal alles wat julle nodig het –” weer waai sy towerstaf “– in die voorraadkas kry –” (die kas se deur vlieg oop) “– julle het ’n uur en ’n half begin.”

Soos Harry-hulle voorspel het, kon Snerp nie vir hulle ’n moeiliker of lastiger opdrag gegee het nie. Die bestanddele moet in presies die regte volgorde en hoeveel-hede in die hekseketel geplaas word; die mengsel moet die presiese aantal kere geroer word; eers regsom en dan linksom; die temperatuur van die vlamme waarop die hekseketel prut, moet vir ’n presiese aantal minute tot ’n sekere vlak verlaag word voor die laaste bestanddeel bygevoeg kan word.

“’n Ligte silwer damp moet nou uit jul towerdrankie opstyg,” sê Snerp toe slegs tien minute oor is.

Harry, wat erg sweet, kyk radeloos in die kerker rond. Sy hekseketel gee hope donkergrys stoom af terwyl Ron s’n groen vonke spoeg. Die vlamme onder Septimus se hekseketel is besig om dood te gaan en hy stook dit koorsig met die punt van sy towerstaf. ’n

Glinsterende silwer damp hang egter bo Hermien se hekseketel. Toe Snerp verbyswiep, staan hy sonder enige kommentaar daarna. Dit beteken hy kan met niks fout vind nie. Maar hy gaan staan langs Harry se hekseketel en gluur met 'n aaklige grynslag daarna.

"Potter, wat is dit veronderstel om te wees?"

Die Slibberins voor in die klas kyk gretig om. Hulle geniet dit vreslik as Snerp vir Harry treiter.

"Die Vredesdrank," sê Harry gespanne.

"Sê vir my, Potter," sê Snerp sag, "kan jy lees?"

Draco Malfoy lag.

"Ja, ek kan," sê Harry terwyl sy vingers styf om sy towerstaf sluit.

"Lees die derde reël van die instruksies vir my, Potter."

Harry loer na die skryfbord. Hy kan die instruksies skaars sien deur die waas veelkleurige stoom wat nou in die kerker hang.

"Voeg die verpoeterde maansteen by, roer drie keer linksom, prut vir sewe minute en voeg dan twee druppels nieskruidstroop by."

Harry se hart sink. Hy het nie die nieskruidstroop bygevoeg nie, maar het onmiddellik met die vierde reël voortgegaan ná sy towerdrankie vir sewe minute geprut het.

"Het jy alles in die derde reël gedoen, Potter?"

"Nee," sê Harry binnensmonds.

"Ekskuus?"

"Nee," sê Harry harder. "Ek het die nieskruid uitgelaat."

"Ek weet jy het, Potter, en dit beteken dat hierdie gemors absoluut nutteloos is. *Evanesco*."

Harry se towerdrankie verdwyn en hy bly langs 'n leë hekseketel staan terwyl hy uiters simpel voel.

"Die van julle wat wel die instruksies kon lees, vul een fles met jou towerdrankie, plak 'n duidelike etiket met jou naam daarop en bring dit na my lessenaar om getoets te word," sê Snerp. "Huiswerk vir Donderdag is dertig sentimeter perkament oor die eienskappe en gebruike van maansteen in die vervaardiging van towerdrankies."

Terwyl almal om hom hul wynflesse vol maak, pak Harry sy goed woedend weg. Sy towerdrankie was niks vrotter as Ron s'n nie, wat nou soos vrot eiers ruik, of Neville s'n, wat soos pas gemengde sement lyk sodat Neville dit nou uit sy hekseketel moet skraap, maar hy, Harry, kry nul vir die dag se werk. Hy bêre sy towerstaf en sak af in sy stoel terwyl hy kyk hoe die res van die klas hul toegekurkte flesse na Snerp se lessenaar neem. Toe die klok eindelijk lui, is Harry heel eerste uit die kerker en hy het reeds begin eet toe Ron en Hermien in die Groot Saal by hom aansluit. Die plafon het in die loop van die oggend nog gryser geword en reën spat teen die hoë vensters.

“Dit was baie onregverdig,” troos Hermien toe sy langs Harry gaan sit en vir haarself herderspastei inskep. “Jou towerdrankie was nie naastenby so swak soos Goliat s’n nie. Toe hy dit in sy fles sit, het die ding gebars en sy kleed aan die brand gesteeek.”

“Ja, wel,” sê Harry en gluur na sy bord, “wanneer was Snerp al ooit regverdig met my?”

Die ander twee antwoord nie. Hulle weet almal baie goed dat Snerp en Harry se vyandskap begin het die oomblik toe Harry by Hogwarts aangekom het.

“Ek het gehoop hy gaan vanjaar darem ’n bietjie beter wees,” sê Hermien in ’n teleurgestelde stem. “Ek bedoel . . . jy weet . . .” Sy kyk versigtig om haar. Daar is ’n halfdosyn lee stoele aan weerskante van hulle en niemand naby die tafel nie. “ . . . Noudat hy in die Orde is en alles.”

“Giftige paddastoele se kolle verander nie,” sê Ron wysgerig. “In elk geval, ek het nog altyd gedink Dompeldorius is mal om vir Snerp te vertrou. Waar is die bewyse dat hy ooit opgehou het om vir Jy-Weet-Wie te werk?”

“Ek is seker Dompeldorius het tonne bewyse, selfs al noem hy hulle nie vir jou nie. Ron,” sê Hermien skerp.

“Hou julle snaters, albei van julle,” sê Harry ergerlik toe Ron sy mond oopmaak om terug te stry. Hermien en Ron vries tegelyk en lyk gekrenk. “Kan julle nie ophou nie?” sê Harry. “Julle is altyd aan-mekaar, dit maak my gek.” Hy los die res van sy herderspastei, swaai sy sak oor sy skouer en stap uit.

Hy draf twee-twee met die marmertrappe op boontoe, verby hordes studente wat vir middagete ondertoe stap. Die woede wat so onverwags opgevlam het, brand nog steeds binne-in hom en die gedagte aan Ron en Hermien se geskokte gesigte laat hom goed voel. *Hulle het daarvoor gesoek, dink hy, hoekom kan hulle nie ophou nie . . . hoekom moet hulle altyd baklei . . . dis genoeg om enigeen gek te maak.*

Hy stap verby die groot prent van Sir Cadogan die ridder in die trapportaal. Sir Cadogan trek sy swaard uit en waai dit dreigend na Harry, wat hom ignoreer.

“Kom terug, jou brandsiek hond! Staan en veg!” gil Sir Cadogan in ’n gesmoorde stem agter sy pantserhelm, maar Harry stap aan. Toe Sir Cadogan hom agternasit en na die portret langsaan hard-loop, loop hy hom vas in die portret se inwoner, ’n yslike kwaai wolfhond!

Harry sit die res van die etensuur alleen onder die valdeur in die Noordtoring. Toe die klok lui, is hy die eerste een wat met die silwer leer na Sybil Trelawney se klas opklouter.

Naas Towerdrankies is Waarsêery die klas waarvan Harry die minste hou. Dis hoofsaaklik weens professor Trelawney se gewoonte om sy voortydige dood kort-kort te voorspel. Hul brandmaer onderwyser is gewoonlik toegewikkel in sjaals en behang met glinsterende stringe krale. Haar bril vergroot haar oë só dat sy Harry altyd aan 'n soort insek laat dink. Toe Harry instap, is sy besig om eksemplare van verweerde leerbandboeke op al die speekbeen-talcltjies in haar dofverligte klaskamer te sit. Die kaggelvuur brand laag, dit ruik sieklik soet en daar is serpe oor die lampe. Dit lyk nie of sy hom sien toe hy in die skadu's gaan sit nie. Die res van die klas draag binne die volgende vyf minute op. Ron klim deur die valdeur, kyk behoedsaam rond, sien vir Harry en stap reguit soontoe – of so na aan reguit as moontlik, omdat hy om tafels, stoele en styfgestopte poefkussings moet vleg.

“Hermien en ek het ophou stry,” sê hy toe hy langs Harry gaan sit.

“Mooi,” brom Harry.

“Maar Hermien sê sy voel dit sal gaaf wees as jy nie jou slegte humeur op ons uithaal nie,” sê Ron.

“Ek haal nie –”

“Ek bring net die boodskap,” val Ron hom in die rede. “Maar ek dink sy's reg. Dis nie ons skuld as Septimus en Snerp goor is met jou nie.”

“Ek het dit nie gesê –”

“Goeiemôre,” sê professor Trelawney in haar mistige, dromerige stem en Harry bly stil. Hy voel tegelyk skaam en kwaad. “Welkom terug by Waarsêery. Ek het julle klomp se lotgevalle natuurlik sorgvuldig tydens die vakansie gevolg en is bly om te sien dat julle almal veilig terug is by Hogwarts – soos ek natuurlik geweet het.

“Julle sal jul eksemplare van *Die Droomorakel*, deur Inigo Imago, op die tafels voor julle sien lê. Die uitleg van drome is 'n baie belangrike metode om die toekoms te voorspel en een wat hoogs waarskynlik tydens jul UILE getoets sal word. Nie dat ek noodwendig glo dat prestasie in eksamens van enige belang is wanneer dit by die kuns van waarsêery kom nie. As jy die Alsiende Oog het, maak sertifikate en grade nie regtig saak nie. Maar die skoolhoof vereis dat julle eksamens skryf, dus...”

Haar stem sterf weg en laat by hulle geen twyfel nie dat professor Trelawney haar vak verhewe bo sulke lae aardse sake soos eksamens sien.

“Blaai asseblief na die inleiding en lees wat Imago sê oor die kwessie van die interpretasie van drome. Verdeel dan in pare en

gebruik *Die Droomorakel* om mekaar se mees onlangse drome te interpreteer. Begin."

Daar kan net een goeie ding van hierdie periode gesê word en dis dat dit nie 'n dubbele periode is nie. Teen die tyd dat almal die inleiding gelees het, is daar skaars tien minute oor vir droomuitleg. Dean en Neville het by die tafel langs Harry en Ron afgepaar. Neville val dadelik weg met 'n langdradige vertelling van 'n nagmerrie oor 'n reuseskêr wat sy ouma se beste hoed ophet. Harry en Ron kyk bloot nukkerig na mekaar.

"Ek onthou nooit my drome nie," sê Ron. "Vertel jy een."

"Jy moet een van hulle onthou," sê Harry ongeduldig.

Hy is nie van plan om sy drome met enigiemand te deel nie. Hy weet baie goed wat sy nagmerrie oor 'n begraafplaas beteken en het nie vir Ron of professor Trelawney of die simpel *Droomorakel* nodig om dit vir hom uit te lê nie.

"Wel, ek het nou die nag gedroom ek speel Kwiddiek," sê Ron en trek sy gesig op 'n plooï soos hy probeer onthou. "Wat dink jy beteken dit?"

"Seker dat 'n reusemalvalekker jou gaan opvreet," sê Harry sonder enige belangstelling terwyl hy deur *Die Droomorakel* blaai. Dis baie vervelig om stukkies drome in die *Orakel* na te slaan en hy voel niks vroliker nie toe professor Trelawney sê hulle huiswerk is om vir 'n maand lank 'n droomdagboek te hou. Toe die klok lui en hy en Ron met die leer afklim, murmureer Ron hard.

"Weet jy hoeveel huiswerk het ons al? Daar's 'n opstel van 'n halwe meter oor die reuse se oorlog vir Binns, Snerp wil dertig sentimeter oor maanstene hê en nou nog 'n maand se droomdagboek vir Trelawney! Fred en George was reg oor die UIL-jaar! Ek hoop daar die Umbridge-vroumens gee ons nie ook . . ."

Toe hulle by die klaskamer vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste instap, sit professor Umbridge reeds agter die onderwyser se tafel. Sy dra dieselfde wollerige pienk knooptrui van die vorige aand en die swart fluweelhaarstrik bo-op haar kop. Harry dink weer aan 'n vlieg wat dom genoeg was om op 'n groot skurwepadde se kop te gaan sit.

Die klas is stil toe hulle instap. Professor Umbridge is nog 'n onbekende faktor en niemand weet hoe streng sy is nie.

"Wel, goeiemiddag!" sê sy toe die hele klas eindelijk gaan sit het. 'n Paar mense mompel "goeiemiddag" terug.

"T-t," sê professor Umbridge. "Dit sal nie deug nie. Ek verwag dat julle 'Goeiemiddag, professor Umbridge' sê. Kom ons probeer weer. Goeiemiddag, klas!"

“Goeiemiddag, professor Umbridge,” kom die reaksie sangerig.

“Dis beter,” sê professor Umbridge soet. “Dit was toe nie so moeilik nie, nè? Towerstawwe weg en veerpenne uit, asseblief.”

Baie van die studente kyk somber na mekaar. Die opdrag “towerstawwe weg” is nog nooit deur ’n prikkelende les gevolg nie. Harry steek sy towerstaf in sy sak en haal sy veerpen, ink en perkament uit. Professor Umbridge maak haar handsak oop, haal haar eie towerstaf uit – ’n besonder kort een – en tik daarmee teen die skryfbord. Woorde verskyn dadelik op die bord:

Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste 'n Terugkeer na basiese beginsels

“Wel, julle onderrig in hierdie vak was tot dusver taamlik onderbroke en fragmentaries, nie waar nie?” sê professor Umbridge toe sy na die klas draai, haar hande sedig voor haar gevou. “Die gedurige wisseling van onderwysers, waarvan baie skynbaar nie die kurrikulum soos goedgekeur deur die Ministerie gevolg het nie, het ongelukkig daartoe gelei dat julle ver onder die standaard is wat ons van julle in jul UIL-jaar verwag.

“Julle sal bly wees om te hoor dat hierdie probleme reggestel gaan word. Ons gaan vanjaar ’n sorgvuldig gestruktureerde, teorie-gebaseerde kursus volg wat deur die Ministerie vir Towerkuns goedgekeur is. Skryf asseblief die volgende neer.”

Sy tik weer teen die skryfbord. Die eerste boodskap verdwyn en word deur “Kursusdoelstellings” vervang.

1. Begrip vir die beginsels onderliggend aan die verdedigende kunste.
2. Herkenning van situasies waartydens verdedigende towerkunste wetmatig gebruik kan word.
3. Verdedigende towerkuns in konteks geplaas vir praktiese toepassing.

Vir ’n paar minute is die lug gevul met die gekrap van veerpenne op perkament. Toe almal professor Umbridge se drie kursusdoelstellings neergeskryf het, vra sy: “Het almal ’n eksemplaar van *Die Teorie van die Verdedigingstoorkuns*, deur Wilbert Sluiphard?”

’n Dowwe geprewel ruis deur die klas.

“Ons probeer weer,” sê professor Umbridge. “Wanneer ek julle ’n vraag vra, verwag ek dat julle soos volg sal antwoord: ‘Ja, professor Umbridge’ of ‘Nee, professor Umbridge’. Nou, het almal ’n eksemplaar van *Die Teorie van die Verdedigingstoorkuns*, deur Wilbert Sluiphard?”

“Ja, professor Umbridge,” weergalm dit deur die klas.

“Goed,” sê professor Umbridge. “Blaai na bladsy vyf en lees Hoofstuk Een, ‘Basiese aspekte vir beginners’. Dit is nie nodig om te praat nie.”

Sy draai weg van die skryfbord en gaan sit op die stoel agter die onderwyser se tafel terwyl sy stip met haar pofferige paddaoë na hulle staar. Harry blaai na bladsy vyf van sy eksemplaar van *Die Teorie van die Verdedigingstoorkuns* en begin lees.

Dis uiters vervelig, ruim so vervelig soos om na professor Binns te moet luister. Harry voel hoe sy konsentrasie verslap. Hy lees dieselfde reël ’n halfdosyn keer sonder om verder in te neem as die eerste paar woorde. Etlike minute gaan in sulke verby. Langs hom draai Ron sy veerpen ingedagte om en om tussen sy vingers terwyl hy na dieselfde plek op die bladsy staar. Harry kyk na regs en sien tot sy verbasing dat Hermien nog nie eens haar eksemplaar van *Die Teorie van die Verdedigingstoorkuns* oopgemaak het nie. Sy hou haar hand in die lug en kyk stip na professor Umbridge.

Harry kan nie onthou dat Hermien al ooit geweier het om iets te lees as die opdrag gegee is nie. Sy kon nog nooit die versoeking weerstaan om enige boek wat onder haar neus beland, oop te maak nie. Hy kyk vraend na haar, maar sy skud haar kop effens asof sy wil sê sy gaan nie vrae beantwoord nie en hou aan om na professor Umbridge te staar, wat net so doelgerig wegkyk.

’n Paar minute later is Harry nie meer die enigste een wat vir Hermien dophou nie. Die hoofstuk wat hulle moet lees, is so vervelig dat al hoe meer mense eerder kyk hoe Hermien professor Umbridge se aandag probeer trek as om met die “Basiese aspekte vir beginners” te worstel.

Toe meer as die helfte van die klas na Hermien kyk en nie na hulle boeke nie, besluit professor Umbridge om die situasie nie langer te ignoreer nie.

“Wil jy iets oor die hoofstuk weet, hartjie?” vra sy vir Hermien asof sy haar pas vir die eerste keer raak gesien het.

“Nie oor die hoofstuk nie, nee,” sê Hermien.

“Wel, ons lees nou.” Professor Umbridge ontbloot haar klein skerp tandjies. “As jy ander vrae het, kan ons ná die klas daarna kyk.”

“My vraag is oor die kursusdoelstellings,” sê Hermien.

Professor Umbridge lig haar wenkbroue.

“En jou naam is?”

“Hermien la Grange.”

“Wel, mejuffrou La Grange, ek dink die kursusdoelstellings is heeltemal duidelik as jy dit sorgvuldig lees,” sê professor Umbridge in ’n vasberade soet stem.

“Wel, ek dink nie so nie,” sê Hermien kortaf. “Daar is niks oor die gebruik van verdedigende towerspreuke nie.”

In die kort stilte wat volg, draai verskeie studente hul koppe fronsend na die drie kursusdoelstellings wat nog steeds op die skryfbord staan.

“Die gebruik van verdedigende towerspreuke?” herhaal professor Umbridge met ’n laggie. “Wel, ek kan aan geen situasie dink wat in my klas kan ontstaan waarvoor jy ’n verdedigende towerspreuk sal nodig hê nie, mejuffrou La Grange. Jy verwag darem seker nie dat jy tydens lesse aangeval sal word nie?”

“Ons gaan nie toor nie?” vra Ron hard.

“Studente steek hul hande op as hulle in my klas wil praat, meneer –”

“Weasley,” sê Ron en steek sy hand in die lug.

Professor Umbridge glimlag nog breër en keer haar rug op hom. Harry en Hermien steek hulle hande ook onmiddellik op. Professor Umbridge se uitpeuloë rus ’n oomblik op Harry voor sy weer met Hermien praat.

“Ja, juffrou La Grange, jy wou nog iets gevra het?”

“Ja,” sê Hermien. “Is die doel van Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste dan nie om verdedigende towerspreuke te leer nie?”

“Is jy ’n opvoedkundige wat deur die Ministerie opgelei is, mejuffrou La Grange?” vra professor Umbridge in haar vals soet stem.

“Nee, maar –”

“Wel, in daardie geval is ek bevrees jy is nie gekwalifiseer om te besluit wat die ‘doel’ van enige kursus is nie. Towenaars baie ouer en wyser as jy het hierdie nuwe studieprogram saamgestel. Jy sal in ’n veilige, risikovrye omgewing oor verdedigende towerspreuke leer –”

“Wat help dit?” vra Harry hard. “As ons aangeval word, sal dit nie in ’n –”

“Hand, meneer Potter!” sing professor Umbridge.

Harry druk sy vuus in die lug. Professor Umbridge draai weer weg van hom, maar nou is verskeie ander mense se hande ook in die lug.

“En jou naam is?” vra professor Umbridge vir Dean.

“Dean Thomas.”

“Ja, meneer Thomas?”

“Wel, dis soos Harry sê, dan nie? As ons aangeval word, sal dit nie risikovry wees nie.”

Professor Umbridge glimlag op ’n irriterende manier vir Dean. “Ek herhaal: verwag jy om tydens my klasse aangeval te word?”

“Nee, maar –”

Professor Umbridge praat hom dood. “Ek wil nie die manier

waarop dinge in hierdie skool gedoen word, kritiseer nie," sê sy en 'n onoortuigende glimlag verrek haar breë mond. "Maar julle is in hierdie klas aan besonder onverantwoordelike towenaars blootgestel, inderdaad besonder onverantwoordelik. Om nie te praat van," sy gee 'n gemene laggie, "besonder gevaarlike halfbloeders nie."

"As dit professor Lupin is," sê Dean ergerlik, "hy was die beste wat ons nog ooit –"

"Hand, meneer Thomas! Soos ek gesê het, julle is blootgestel aan towerspreuke wat kompleks, nie geskik vir jul ouderdom nie en potensieel dodelik is. Julle is so bang gepraat dat julle glo julle kan enige oomblik Donker aanvalle te wagte wees –"

"Nee, ons is nie," sê Hermien, "ons het net –"

"Jou hand is nie op nie, juffrou La Grangel"

Hermien steek haar hand op. Professor Umbridge draai weg.

"Ek verstaan dat my voorganger nie net onwettige vloeke voor julle gedoen het nie, maar dat hy dit selfs op julle toegepas het."

"Wêl, dit het later uitgekom dat hy al die tyd mal was," sê Dean vies. "Maar ons het nogtans tonne geleer."

"Jou hand is nie op nie, meneer Thomas!" sê professor Umbridge trillend. "Nou, dit is die mening van die Ministerie dat 'n teoretiese kennis meer as voldoende sal wees om julle deur die eksamens te kry, dit is tog waaroor skool gaan. En jou naam?" voeg sy by en staar na Parvati, wie se hand so pas opgeskiet het.

"Parvati Patel. Is daar dus niks prakties in ons Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-UIL nie? Moet ons nie kan wys dat ons die teenvloeke en goed kan doen nie?"

"As julle die teorie goed leer, sal julle die towerspreuke onder ten volle gekontroleerde omstandighede in die eksamenlokaal kan doen," sê professor Umbridge ongeërg.

"Sonder om vooraf te oefen?" sê Parvati ongelowig. "Gaan ons in die eksamen vir die eerste keer die towerspreuke moet uitvoer?"

"Ek herhaal, as julle die teorie goed genoeg leer –"

"En hoe gaan die teorie ons in die buitewêreld help?" sê Harry hard, sy vuis weer in die lug.

Professor Umbridge kyk op.

"Dit is nie die buitewêreld nie, meneer Potter, dis 'n skool."

"Ons gaan dus nie voorbereid wees op wat vir ons daar buite wag nie?"

"Niks wag daar nie, meneer Potter."

"O ja?" Harry se humeur, wat nog die hele dag onder die oppervlak borrel, het kookpunt bereik.

“Wie dink jy gaan kinders soos julle aanval?” vra professor Umbridge in haar aaklige heuningsoet stem.

“Hmmm, laat ek sien...” Harry maak of hy dink. “Dalk... die heer Woldemort?”

Ron snak na asem. Hildegard Braun gee 'n klein gillettjie. Neville glip skeef van sy stoel af. Professor Umbridge verroer nie 'n ooglid nie. Sy staar met 'n tevrede glimlaggie na Harry.

“Tien punte afgetrek van Griffindor, meneer Potter.”

Die klas word stil. Almal staar na of Umbridge of Harry.

“Nou, laat ek 'n paar dinge heeltemal duidelik maak.”

Professor Umbridge staan op en leun oor die tafel na hulle, haar hande met die stomp vingers oopgesprei op die blad.

“Julle is wysgemaak dat 'n sekere Donker towenaar weer lewe –”

“Hy was nie dood nie,” sê Harry verwoed, “maar ja, hy lewe!”

“Meneer-Potter-jy-het-reeds-tien-punte-vir-jou-huis-verloor-moenie-sake-vererger-nie,” sing professor Umbridge in een asem sonder om na hom te kyk. “Soos ek gesê het, julle is wysgemaak dat 'n sekere Donker towenaar weer in die rondte is. Dit is 'n leuen.”

“Dit is NIE 'n leuen nie!” sê Harry. “Ek het hom gesien en teen hom geveg!”

“Detensie, meneer Potter!” sê professor Umbridge triomfantlik.

“Môre aand. Vyfuur. My kantoor. Ek herhaal: Dit is 'n leuen. Die Ministerie vir Towerkuns waarborg dat julle nie deur enige Donker towenaar bedreig word nie. As julle julle nog steeds hieroor bekommer, kom sien my gerus na die klas. As iemand julle bang praat met leuns oor wedergebore Donker towenaars, sal ek graag daarvan hoor. Ek is hier om te help. Ek is julle vriend. En nou sal julle asseblief voortgaan met julle leeswerk. Bladsy vyf, ‘Basiese aspekte vir beginners’.”

Professor Umbridge gaan sit agter haar lessenaar. Harry staan op. Almal staar na hom. Septimus lyk tegelyk bang en gefassineer.

“Harry, nee!” fluister Hermien waarskuwend en trek aan sy mou, maar Harry ruk sy arm weg.

“Dan het Cedric Diggory volgens julle vanself doodgegaan, nê?” sê Harry en sy stem skud.

Almal in die klas trek hul asems in, want niemand behalwe Ron en Hermien het nog ooit vir Harry oor die nag toe Cedric dood is, hoor praat nie. Hulle kyk greng van Harry na professor Umbridge, wat haar kop lig en sonder 'n spoor van haar vals glimlaggie na hom staar.

“Cedric Diggory se dood was 'n tragiese ongeluk,” sê sy kil.

“Dit was moord,” sê Harry. Hy voel hoe hy bewe. Hy het nog met

amper niemand hieroor gepraat nie, beslis nie met dertig nuuskierige klasmaats nie. "Woldemort het hom vermoor en julle weet dit."

Professor Umbridge se gesig is uitdrukkingloos. Harry wonder vir 'n oomblik of sy op hom gaan skree. Dan sê sy in haar sagste, soetste dogtertjestemmetjie: "Kom hier, meneer Potter, hartjie."

Harry skop sy stoel uit die pad en stap om Ron en Hermien na die onderwyser se tafel. Hy kan voel dat die res van die klas hul asem s ophou, maar hy is so kwaad, dit kan hom nie skeel wat verder gebeur nie.

Professor Umbridge haal 'n rolletjie pienk perkament uit haar handsak, maak dit oop, dompel haar veerpen in 'n inkbottel en begin skryf, vooroor gebuk sodat Harry niks kan sien nie. Niemand praat nie. 'n Paar minute later rol sy die perkament op en tik dit met haar towerstaf. Dit verseël sonder naat sodat Harry dit nie sal kan oopmaak nie.

"Neem dit vir professor McGonagall, hartjie," sê professor Umbridge en gee dit vir hom.

Harry neem dit sonder 'n woord, draai op sy hakke om, stap uit en gooi die klaskamerdeur agter hom toe sonder om na Ron en Hermien te kyk. Met die brief in sy hand geklem stap hy vinnig in die gang af, om die hoek en loop hom vas in Nurks, die poltergeist, 'n klein mannetjie met 'n groot mond wat op sy rug sweef terwyl hy 'n paar inkbottels in die lug gooi.

"Aha, klein Pottie Potter!" kerkel Nurks. Hy laat val twee inkbottels, wat breek sodat die ink oor die mure spat. Harry spring eenkant toe.

"Gee pad, Nurks," snou hy.

"Oho, Maljan is knorrig," sê Nurks en sweef grynsend bokant Harry in die gang. "Wat is dit nou weer, my liewe vriend Potter? Hoor jy stemme? Sien jy gesigte? Praat jy in – tonge?" koggel Nurks.

"Ek het gesê los my UIT!" skree Harry en hardloop met die naaste stel trappe na onder, maar Nurks gly op sy rug teen die reling langs hom af.

*"Die meeste dink hy's dik getik,
die arme domme Pottie,
'n paar is minder naar
en voel hy kry so swaar,
maar Nurksie weet die stomme sot
is heeltemal waansinnig –"*

"HOU JOU BEK!"

Hy deur aan Harry se linkerkant vlieg oop en professor McGonagall storm uit haar kantoor. Sy lyk iesegrimmig en effens verstrooid. "Hoekom op aarde skree jy so, Potter?" snou sy, terwyl Nurks vermakelig kekkel en blitsig wegzoem. "Hoekom is jy nie in die klas nie?"

"Ek is hierheen gestuur," sê Harry styf.

"Gestuur? Wat bedoel jy, gestuur?"

Hy hou professor Umbridge se briefie uit. Professor McGonagall neem dit fronsend en maak dit oop deur met haar towerstaf daarop te tik. Haar oë agter die vierkantige brillense vlieg heen en weer en word met elke reël nouer terwyl sy dit lees.

"Kom in, Potter."

Harry stap die studeerkamer binne. Die deur gaan outomaties agter hom toe.

"Wel?" sê professor McGonagall. "Is dit waar?"

"Is wat waar?" vra Harry meer aggressief as wat hy bedoel het. "Professor?" voeg hy by in 'n poging om hoflik te klink.

"Is dit waar dat jy op professor Umbridge geskree het?"

"Ja," sê Harry.

"Het jy haar 'n leuenaar genoem?"

"Ja."

"Het jy vir haar gesê Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie is terug?"

"Ja."

Professor McGonagall gaan sit agter haar lessenaar en kyk stip na Harry. Toe sê sy: "Kry 'n koekie, Potter."

"'n - Wat?"

"'n Koekie," herhaal sy ongeduldig en wys na 'n tartanblik op een van die stapels papiere op haar lessenaar. "En sit tog."

Harry het al by 'n vorige geleentheid verwag dat professor McGonagall hom gaan straf en toe pleks daarvan in Griffindor se Kwiddiekspan beland. Hy gaan sit op die stoel oorkant haar en haal 'n gemmerkoekie uit. Hy voel net so verward en deur die wind soos daardie keer.

Professor McGonagall sit professor Umbridge se brief neer en kyk baie ernstig na hom.

"Potter, jy moet versigtig wees."

Harry sluk sy mond vol gemmerkoekies en staar na haar. Haar stem klink heeltemal anders as waaraan hy gewoond is. Dis nie flink en afgemete en streng nie. Dis laag en angstig en op 'n manier meer menslik as gewoonlik.

“As jy jou nie in Dolores Umbridge se klas gedra nie, kan dit jou baie duurder te staan kom as blote huispunte en detensie.”

“Wat bedoel – ?”

“Potter, gebruik jou verstand,” snou sy skielik weer op haar ou manier. “Jy weet waarvandaan sy kom en jy weet sekerlik aan wie sy verslag doen.”

Die klok lui vir die einde van die periode. Bo en om hulle klink swaar stampgeluide op soos honderde studente begin beweeg.

“Dit staan hier dat jy van môre af elke aand van die week detensie het.” Professor McGonagall kyk weer na Umbridge se brief.

“Elke aand van die week!” herhaal Harry geskok. “Maar Professor, kan – ”

“Nee, ek kan nie,” sê professor McGonagall pront.

“Maar – ”

“Sy’s jou onderwyser en sy het die volste reg om jou detensie te gee. Jy sal môreaand om vyfuur vir die eerste een in haar klaskamer wees. En onthou wat ek vir jou sê: trap in jou spoor as jy naby Dolores Umbridge is.”

“Maar ek het die waarheid gepraat!” sê Harry verontwaardig. “Woldemort is terug, u weet hy is, professor McGonagall. Professor Dompeldorius weet – ”

“Om vadersnaam, Potter!” sê professor McGonagall en druk haar bril ergerlik reg (sy het inmekaargekrimp toe hy Woldemort se naam gesê het). “Dink jy regtig dit gaan oor waarheid of leuens? Dit gaan oor kophou en jou humeur beteuell”

Sy staan op, haar neusgate oopgesper en haar mond baie dun. Harry staan ook op.

“Kry nog ’n koekie,” sê sy geïrriteerd en stoot die blik na hom toe.

“Nee dankie,” sê Harry kil.

“Moenie verspot wees nie,” snou sy.

Hy neem een.

“Dankie,” sê hy teensinnig.

“Het jy nie na Dolores Umbridge se toespraak geluister nie, Potter?”

“Ja,” sê Harry. “Ja . . . sy’t gesê . . . vooruitgang sal verbied word en . . . hm, dit beteken dat . . . dat die Ministerie vir Towerkuns by Hogwarts probeer inmeng.”

Professor McGonagall kyk ’n oomblik skerp na hom, dan snuif sy, stap om haar lessenaar en maak die deur vir hom oop.

“Ek is bly jy luister ten minste na Hermien la Grange,” sê sy en wys dat hy moet gaan.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



DETENTION WITH DOLORES

Dinner in the Great Hall that night was not a pleasant experience for Harry. The news about his shouting match with Umbridge seemed to have traveled exceptionally fast even by Hogwarts standards. He heard whispers all around him as he sat eating between Ron and Hermione. The funny thing was that none of the whisperers seemed to mind him overhearing what they were saying about him — on the contrary, it was as though they were hoping he would get angry and start shouting again, so that they could hear his story firsthand.

“He says he saw Cedric Diggory murdered . . .”

“He reckons he dueled with You-Know-Who . . .”

“Come off it . . .”

“Who does he think he’s kidding?”

“Pur-lease . . .”

“What I don’t get,” said Harry in a shaking voice, laying down his

knife and fork (his hands were trembling too much to hold them steady), “is why they all believed the story two months ago when Dumbledore told them . . .”

“The thing is, Harry, I’m not sure they did,” said Hermione grimly. “Oh, let’s get out of here.”

She slammed down her own knife and fork; Ron looked sadly at his half-finished apple pie but followed suit. People stared at them all the way out of the Hall.

“What d’you mean, you’re not sure they believed Dumbledore?” Harry asked Hermione when they reached the first-floor landing.

“Look, you don’t understand what it was like after it happened,” said Hermione quietly. “You arrived back in the middle of the lawn clutching Cedric’s dead body. . . . None of us saw what happened in the maze. . . . We just had Dumbledore’s word for it that You-Know-Who had come back and killed Cedric and fought you.”

“Which is the truth!” said Harry loudly.

“I know it is, Harry, so will you *please* stop biting my head off?” said Hermione wearily. “It’s just that before the truth could sink in, everyone went home for the summer, where they spent two months reading about how you’re a nutcase and Dumbledore’s going senile!”

Rain pounded on the windowpanes as they strode along the empty corridors back to Gryffindor Tower. Harry felt as though his first day had lasted a week, but he still had a mountain of homework to do before bed. A dull pounding pain was developing over his right eye. He glanced out of a rain-washed window at the dark grounds as they turned into the Fat Lady’s corridor. There was still no light in Hagrid’s cabin.

“*Mimbulus mimbletonia*,” said Hermione, before the Fat Lady could ask. The portrait swung open to reveal the hole behind and the three of them scrambled back through it.

The common room was almost empty; nearly everyone was still down at dinner. Crookshanks uncoiled himself from an armchair and trotted to meet them, purring loudly, and when Harry, Ron, and Hermione took their three favorite chairs at the fireside he leapt lightly into Hermione’s lap and curled up there like a furry ginger cushion. Harry gazed into the flames, feeling drained and exhausted.

“*How* can Dumbledore have let this happen?” Hermione cried suddenly, making Harry and Ron jump; Crookshanks leapt off her, looking affronted. She pounded the arms of her chair in fury, so that bits of stuffing leaked out of the holes. “How can he let that terrible woman teach us? And in our O.W.L. year too!”

“Well, we’ve never had great Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, have we?” said Harry. “You know what it’s like, Hagrid told us, nobody wants the job, they say it’s jinxed.”

“Yes, but to employ someone who’s actually refusing to let us do magic! *What’s* Dumbledore playing at?”

“And she’s trying to get people to spy for her,” said Ron darkly. “Remember when she said she wanted us to come and tell her if we hear anyone saying You-Know-Who’s back?”

“Of course she’s here to spy on us all, that’s obvious, why else would Fudge have wanted her to come?” snapped Hermione.

“Don’t start arguing again,” said Harry wearily, as Ron opened his mouth to retaliate. “Can’t we just . . . Let’s just do that homework, get it out of the way . . .”

They collected their schoolbags from a corner and returned to the chairs by the fire. People were coming back from dinner now. Harry kept his face averted from the portrait hole, but could still sense the stares he was attracting.

“Shall we do Snape’s stuff first?” said Ron, dipping his quill into his ink. “*‘The properties . . . of moonstone . . . and its uses . . . in potion-making . . .’*” he muttered, writing the words across the top of his parchment as he spoke them. “There.” He underlined the title, then looked up expectantly at Hermione.

“So what are the properties of moonstone and its uses in potion-making?”

But Hermione was not listening; she was squinting over into the far corner of the room, where Fred, George, and Lee Jordan were now sitting at the center of a knot of innocent-looking first years, all of whom were chewing something that seemed to have come out of a large paper bag that Fred was holding.

“No, I’m sorry, they’ve gone too far,” she said, standing up and looking positively furious. “Come on, Ron.”

“I — what?” said Ron, plainly playing for time. “No — come on, Hermione — we can’t tell them off for giving out sweets . . .”

“You know perfectly well that those are bits of Nosebleed Nougat or — or Puking Pastilles or —”

“Fainting Fancies?” Harry suggested quietly.

One by one, as though hit over the heads with invisible mallets, the first years were slumping unconscious in their seats; some slid right onto the floor, others merely hung over the arms of their chairs, their tongues lolling out. Most of the people watching were laughing;

Hermione, however, squared her shoulders and marched directly over to where Fred and George now stood with clipboards, closely observing the unconscious first years. Ron rose halfway out of his chair, hovered uncertainly for a moment or two, then muttered to Harry, "She's got it under control," before sinking as low in his chair as his lanky frame permitted.

"That's enough!" Hermione said forcefully to Fred and George, both of whom looked up in mild surprise.

"Yeah, you're right," said George, nodding, "this dosage looks strong enough, doesn't it?"

"I told you this morning, you can't test your rubbish on students!"

"We're paying them!" said Fred indignantly.

"I don't care, it could be dangerous!"

"Rubbish," said Fred.

"Calm down, Hermione, they're fine!" said Lee reassuringly as he walked from first year to first year, inserting purple sweets into their open mouths.

"Yeah, look, they're coming round now," said George.

A few of the first years were indeed stirring. Several looked so shocked to find themselves lying on the floor, or dangling off their chairs, that Harry was sure Fred and George had not warned them what the sweets were going to do.

"Feel all right?" said George kindly to a small dark-haired girl lying at his feet.

"I-I think so," she said shakily.

"Excellent," said Fred happily, but the next second Hermione had snatched both his clipboard and the paper bag of Fainting Fancies.

from his hands.

“It is NOT excellent!”

“‘Course it is, they’re alive, aren’t they?” said Fred angrily.

“You can’t do this, what if you made one of them really ill?”

“We’re not going to make them ill, we’ve already tested them all on ourselves, this is just to see if everyone reacts the same —”

“If you don’t stop doing it, I’m going to —”

“Put us in detention?” said Fred in an I’d-like-to-see-you-try-it voice.

“Make us write lines?” said George, smirking.

Onlookers all over the room were laughing. Hermione drew herself up to her full height; her eyes were narrowed and her bushy hair seemed to crackle with electricity.

“No,” she said, her voice quivering with anger, “but I will write to your mother.”

“You wouldn’t,” said George, horrified, taking a step back from her.

“Oh, yes, I would,” said Hermione grimly. “I can’t stop you eating the stupid things yourselves, but you’re not giving them to first years.”

Fred and George looked thunderstruck. It was clear that as far as they were concerned, Hermione’s threat was way below the belt. With a last threatening look at them, she thrust Fred’s clipboard and the bag of Fancies back into his arms and stalked back to her chair by the fire.

Ron was now so low in his seat that his nose was roughly level with his knees.

"Thank you for your support, Ron," Hermione said acidly.

"You handled it fine by yourself," Ron mumbled.

Hermione stared down at her blank piece of parchment for a few seconds, then said edgily, "Oh, it's no good, I can't concentrate now. I'm going to bed."

She wrenched her bag open; Harry thought she was about to put her books away, but instead she pulled out two misshapen woolly objects, placed them carefully on a table by the fireplace, covered them with a few screwed-up bits of parchment and a broken quill, and stood back to admire the effect.

"What in the name of Merlin are you doing?" said Ron, watching her as though fearful for her sanity.

"They're hats for house-elves," she said briskly, now stuffing her books back into her bag. "I did them over the summer. I'm a really slow knitter without magic, but now I'm back at school I should be able to make lots more."

"You're leaving out hats for the house-elves?" said Ron slowly. "And you're covering them up with rubbish first?"

"Yes," said Hermione defiantly, swinging her bag onto her back.

"That's not on," said Ron angrily. "You're trying to trick them into picking up the hats. You're setting them free when they might not want to be free."

"Of course they want to be free!" said Hermione at once, though her face was turning pink. "Don't you dare touch those hats, Ron!"

She left. Ron waited until she had disappeared through the door to the girls' dormitories, then cleared the rubbish off the woolly hats.

"They should at least see what they're picking up," he said firmly.

“Anyway . . .” He rolled up the parchment on which he had written the title of Snape’s essay. “There’s no point trying to finish this now, I can’t do it without Hermione, I haven’t got a clue what you’re supposed to do with moonstones, have you?”

Harry shook his head, noticing as he did so that the ache in his right temple was getting worse. He thought of the long essay on giant wars and the pain stabbed at him sharply. Knowing perfectly well that he would regret not finishing his homework tonight when the morning came, he piled his books back into his bag.

“I’m going to bed too.”

He passed Seamus on the way to the door leading to the dormitories, but did not look at him. Harry had a fleeting impression that Seamus had opened his mouth to speak, but sped up, and reached the soothing peace of the stone spiral staircase without having to endure any more provocation.

The following day dawned just as leaden and rainy as the previous one. Hagrid was still absent from the staff table at breakfast.

“But on the plus side, no Snape today,” said Ron bracingly.

Hermione yawned widely and poured herself some coffee. She looked mildly pleased about something, and when Ron asked her what she had to be so happy about, she simply said, “The hats have gone. Seems the house-elves do want freedom after all.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Ron told her cuttingly. “They might not count as clothes. They didn’t look anything like hats to me, more like woolly bladders.”

Hermione did not speak to him all morning.

Double Charms was succeeded by double Transfiguration. Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall both spent the first fifteen minutes of their lessons lecturing the class on the importance of O.W.L.s.

“What you must remember,” said little Professor Flitwick squeakily, perched as ever on a pile of books so that he could see over the top of his desk, “is that these examinations may influence your futures for many years to come! If you have not already given serious thought to your careers, now is the time to do so. And in the meantime, I’m afraid, we shall be working harder than ever to ensure that you all do yourselves justice!”

They then spent more than an hour reviewing Summoning Charms, which according to Professor Flitwick were bound to come up in their O.W.L., and he rounded off the lesson by setting them their largest amount of Charms homework ever.

It was the same, if not worse, in Transfiguration.

“You cannot pass an O.W.L.,” said Professor McGonagall grimly, “without serious application, practice, and study. I see no reason why everybody in this class should not achieve an O.W.L. in Transfiguration as long as they put in the work.” Neville made a sad little disbelieving noise. “Yes, you too, Longbottom,” said Professor McGonagall. “There’s nothing wrong with your work except lack of confidence. So . . . today we are starting Vanishing Spells. These are easier than Conjuring Spells, which you would not usually attempt until N.E.W.T. level, but they are still among the most difficult magic you will be tested on in your O.W.L.”

She was quite right; Harry found the Vanishing Spells horribly

difficult. By the end of a double period, neither he nor Ron had managed to vanish the snails on which they were practicing, though Ron said hopefully that he thought his looked a bit paler. Hermione, on the other hand, successfully vanished her snail on the third attempt, earning her a ten-point bonus for Gryffindor from Professor McGonagall. She was the only person not given homework; everybody else was told to practice the spell overnight, ready for a fresh attempt on their snails the following afternoon.

Now panicking slightly about the amount of homework they had to do, Harry and Ron spent their lunch hour in the library looking up the uses of moonstones in potion-making. Still angry about Ron's slur on her woolly hats, Hermione did not join them. By the time they reached Care of Magical Creatures in the afternoon, Harry's head was aching again.

The day had become cool and breezy, and, as they walked down the sloping lawn toward Hagrid's cabin on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, they felt the occasional drop of rain on their faces. Professor Grubbly-Plank stood waiting for the class some ten yards from Hagrid's front door, a long trestle table in front of her laden with many twigs. As Harry and Ron reached her, a loud shout of laughter sounded behind them; turning, they saw Draco Malfoy striding toward them, surrounded by his usual gang of Slytherin cronies. He had clearly just said something highly amusing, because Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy Parkinson, and the rest continued to snigger heartily as they gathered around the trestle table. Judging by the fact that all of them kept looking over at Harry, he was able to guess the subject of the joke without too much difficulty.

“Everyone here?” barked Professor Grubbly-Plank, once all the Slytherins and Gryffindors had arrived. “Let’s crack on then — who can tell me what these things are called?”

She indicated the heap of twigs in front of her. Hermione’s hand shot into the air. Behind her back, Malfoy did a buck-toothed imitation of her jumping up and down in eagerness to answer a question. Pansy Parkinson gave a shriek of laughter that turned almost at once into a scream, as the twigs on the table leapt into the air and revealed themselves to be what looked like tiny pixieish creatures made of wood, each with knobbly brown arms and legs, two twiglike fingers at the end of each hand, and a funny, flat, barklike face in which a pair of beetle-brown eyes glittered.

“Ooooooh!” said Parvati and Lavender, thoroughly irritating Harry. Anyone would have thought that Hagrid never showed them impressive creatures; admittedly the flobberworms had been a bit dull, but the salamanders and hippogriffs had been interesting enough, and the Blast-Ended Skrewts perhaps too much so.

“Kindly keep your voices down, girls!” said Professor Grubbly-Plank sharply, scattering a handful of what looked like brown rice among the stick-creatures, who immediately fell upon the food. “So — anyone know the names of these creatures? Miss Granger?”

“Bowtruckles,” said Hermione. “They’re tree-guardians, usually live in wand-trees.”

“Five points for Gryffindor,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank. “Yes, these are bowtruckles and, as Miss Granger rightly says, they generally live in trees whose wood is of wand quality. Anybody know what they eat?”

“Wood lice,” said Hermione promptly, which explained why what Harry had taken for grains of brown rice were moving. “But fairy eggs if they can get them.”

“Good girl, take another five points. So whenever you need leaves or wood from a tree in which a bowtruckle lodges, it is wise to have a gift of wood lice ready to distract or placate it. They may not look dangerous, but if angered they will gouge out human eyes with their fingers, which, as you can see, are very sharp and not at all desirable near the eyeballs. So if you’d like to gather closer, take a few wood lice and a bowtruckle — I have enough here for one between three — you can study them more closely. I want a sketch from each of you with all body parts labeled by the end of the lesson.”

The class surged forward around the trestle table. Harry deliberately circled around the back so that he ended up right next to Professor Grubbly-Plank.

“Where’s Hagrid?” he asked her, while everyone else was choosing bowtruckles.

“Never you mind,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank repressively, which had been her attitude last time Hagrid had failed to turn up for a class too. Smirking all over his pointed face, Draco Malfoy leaned across Harry and seized the largest bowtruckle.

“Maybe,” said Malfoy in an undertone, so that only Harry could hear him, “the stupid great oaf’s got himself badly injured.”

“Maybe you will if you don’t shut up,” said Harry out of the side of his mouth.

“Maybe he’s been messing with stuff that’s too *big* for him, if you get my drift.”

Malfoy walked away, smirking over his shoulder at Harry, who suddenly felt sick. Did Malfoy know something? His father was a Death Eater, after all; what if he had information about Hagrid's fate that had not yet reached the Order's ears? He hurried back around the table to Ron and Hermione, who were squatting on the grass some distance away and attempting to persuade a bowtruckle to remain still long enough to draw it. Harry pulled out parchment and quill, crouched down beside the others, and related in a whisper what Malfoy had just said.

"Dumbledore would know if something had happened to Hagrid," said Hermione at once. "It's just playing into Malfoy's hands to look worried, it tells him we don't know exactly what's going on. We've got to ignore him, Harry. Here, hold the bowtruckle for a moment, just so I can draw its face . . ."

"Yes," came Malfoy's clear drawl from the group nearest them, "Father was talking to the Minister just a couple of days ago, you know, and it sounds as though the Ministry's really determined to crack down on substandard teaching in this place. So even if that overgrown moron *does* show up again, he'll probably be sent packing straight away."

"OUCH!"

Harry had gripped the bowtruckle so hard that it had almost snapped; it had just taken a great retaliatory swipe at his hand with its sharp fingers, leaving two long deep cuts there. Harry dropped it; Crabbe and Goyle, who had already been guffawing at the idea of Hagrid being sacked, laughed still harder as the bowtruckle set off at full tilt toward the forest, a little, moving stickman soon swallowed

up by the tree roots. When the bellechoed distantly over the grounds Harry rolled up his bloodstained bowtruckle picture and marched off to Herbology with his hand wrapped in a handkerchief of Hermione's and Malfoy's derisive laughter still ringing in his ears.

"If he calls Hagrid a moron one more time . . ." snarled Harry.

"Harry, don't go picking a row with Malfoy, don't forget, he's a prefect now, he could make life difficult for you . . ."

"Wow, I wonder what it'd be like to have a difficult life?" said Harry sarcastically. Ron laughed, but Hermione frowned. Together they traipsed across the vegetable patch. The sky still appeared unable to make up its mind whether it wanted to rain or not.

"I just wish Hagrid would hurry up and get back, that's all," said Harry in a low voice, as they reached the greenhouses. "And *don't* say that Grubbly-Plank woman's a better teacher!" he added threateningly.

"I wasn't going to," said Hermione calmly.

"Because she'll never be as good as Hagrid," said Harry firmly, fully aware that he had just experienced an exemplary Care of Magical Creatures lesson and was thoroughly annoyed about it.

The door of the nearest greenhouse opened and some fourth years spilled out of it, including Ginny.

"Hi," she said brightly as she passed. A few seconds later, Luna Lovegood emerged, trailing behind the rest of the class, a smudge of earth on her nose and her hair tied in a knot on the top of her head. When she saw Harry, her prominent eyes seemed to bulge excitedly and she made a beeline straight for him. Many of his classmates turned curiously to watch. Luna took a great breath and then said,

without so much as a preliminary hello. “I believe He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back, and I believe you fought him and escaped from him.”

“Er — right,” said Harry awkwardly. Luna was wearing what looked like a pair of orange radishes for earrings, a fact that Parvati and Lavender seemed to have noticed, as they were both giggling and pointing at her earlobes.

“You can laugh!” Luna said, her voice rising, apparently under the impression that Parvati and Lavender were laughing at what she had said rather than what she was wearing. “But people used to believe there were no such things as the Blibbering Humdinger or the Crumple-Horned Snorkack!”

“Well, they were right, weren’t they?” said Hermione impatiently. “There *weren’t* any such things as the Blibbering Humdinger or the Crumple-Horned Snorkack.”

Luna gave her a withering look and flounced away, radishes swinging madly. Parvati and Lavender were not the only ones hooting with laughter now.

“D’you mind not offending the only people who believe me?” Harry asked Hermione as they made their way into class.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Harry, you can do better than *her*,” said Hermione. “Ginny’s told me all about her, apparently she’ll only believe in things as long as there’s no proof at all. Well, I wouldn’t expect anything else from someone whose father runs *The Quibbler*.”

Harry thought of the sinister winged horses he had seen on the night he had arrived and how Luna had said she could see them too. His spirits sank slightly. Had she been lying? But before he could

devote much more thought to the matter, Ernie Macmillan had stepped up to him.

“I want you to know, Potter,” he said in a loud, carrying voice, “that it’s not only weirdos who support you. I personally believe you one hundred percent. My family have always stood firm behind Dumbledore, and so do I.”

“Er — thanks very much, Ernie,” said Harry, taken aback but pleased. Ernie might be pompous on occasions like these, but Harry was in a mood to deeply appreciate a vote of confidence from somebody who was not wearing radishes in their ears. Ernie’s words had certainly wiped the smile from Lavender Brown’s face and, as he turned to talk to Ron and Hermione, Harry caught Seamus’s expression, which looked both confused and defiant.

To nobody’s surprise, Professor Sprout started their lesson by lecturing them about the importance of O.W.L.s. Harry wished all the teachers would stop doing this; he was starting to get an anxious, twisted feeling in his stomach every time he remembered how much homework he had to do, a feeling that worsened dramatically when Professor Sprout gave them yet another essay at the end of class. Tired and smelling strongly of dragon dung, Professor Sprout’s preferred brand of fertilizer, the Gryffindors trooped back up to the castle, none of them talking very much; it had been another long day.

As Harry was starving, and he had his first detention with Umbridge at five o’clock, he headed straight for dinner without dropping off his bag in Gryffindor Tower so that he could bolt something down before facing whatever she had in store for him. He had barely reached the entrance of the Great Hall, however, when a

loud and angry voice said, "Oy, Potter!"

"What now?" he muttered wearily, turning to face Angelina Johnson, who looked as though she was in a towering temper.

"I'll tell you what now," she said, marching straight up to him and poking him hard in the chest with her finger. "How come you've landed yourself in detention for five o'clock on Friday?"

"What?" said Harry. "Why . . . oh yeah, Keeper tryouts!"

"*Now* he remembers!" snarled Angelina. "Didn't I tell you I wanted to do a tryout with the *whole team*, and find someone who *fitted in with everyone*? Didn't I tell you I'd booked the Quidditch pitch specially? And now you've decided you're not going to be there!"

"I didn't decide not to be there!" said Harry, stung by the injustice of these words. "I got detention from that Umbridge woman, just because I told her the truth about You-Know-Who —"

"Well, you can just go straight to her and ask her to let you off on Friday," said Angelina fiercely, "and I don't care how you do it, tell her You-Know-Who's a figment of your imagination if you like, just *make sure you're there!*"

She stormed away.

"You know what?" Harry said to Ron and Hermione as they entered the Great Hall. "I think we'd better check with Puddlemere United whether Oliver Wood's been killed during a training session, because she seems to be channeling his spirit."

"What d'you reckon are the odds of Umbridge letting you off on Friday?" said Ron skeptically, as they sat down at the Gryffindor table.

“Less than zero,” said Harry glumly, tipping lamb chops onto his plate and starting to eat. “Better try, though, hadn’t I? I’ll offer to do two more detentions or something, I dunno . . .” He swallowed a mouthful of potato and added, “I hope she doesn’t keep me too long this evening. You realize we’ve got to write three essays, practice Vanishing Spells for McGonagall, work out a countercharm for Flitwick, finish the bowtruckle drawing, and start that stupid dream diary for Trelawney?”

Ron moaned and for some reason glanced up at the ceiling.

“And it looks like it’s going to rain.”

“What’s that got to do with our homework?” said Hermione, her eyebrows raised.

“Nothing,” said Ron at once, his ears reddening.

At five to five Harry bade the other two good-bye and set off for Umbridge’s office on the third floor. When he knocked on the door she said, “Come in,” in a sugary voice. He entered cautiously, looking around.

He had known this office under three of its previous occupants. In the days when Gilderoy Lockhart had lived here it had been plastered in beaming portraits of its owner. When Lupin had occupied it, it was likely you would meet some fascinating Dark creature in a cage or tank if you came to call. In the impostor Moody’s days it had been packed with various instruments and artifacts for the detection of wrongdoing and concealment.

Now, however, it looked totally unrecognizable. The surfaces had all been draped in lacy covers and cloths. There were several vases full of dried flowers, each residing on its own doily, and on one of

the walls was a collection of ornamental plates, each decorated with a large Technicolored kitten wearing a different bow around its neck. These were so foul that Harry stared at them, transfixed, until Professor Umbridge spoke again.

“Good evening, Mr. Potter.”

Harry started and looked around. He had not noticed her at first because she was wearing a luridly flowered set of robes that blended only too well with the tablecloth on the desk behind her.

“Evening,” Harry said stiffly.

“Well, sit down,” she said, pointing toward a small table draped in lace beside which she had drawn up a straight-backed chair. A piece of blank parchment lay on the table, apparently waiting for him.

“Er,” said Harry, without moving. “Professor Umbridge? Er — before we start, I-I wanted to ask you a . . . a favor.”

Her bulging eyes narrowed.

“Oh yes?”

“Well I’m . . . I’m on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. And I was supposed to be at the tryouts for the new Keeper at five o’clock on Friday and I was — was wondering whether I could skip detention that night and do it — do it another night . . . instead . . .”

He knew long before he reached the end of his sentence that it was no good.

“Oh no,” said Umbridge, smiling so widely that she looked as though she had just swallowed a particularly juicy fly. “Oh no, no, no. This is your punishment for spreading evil, nasty, attention-seeking stories, Mr. Potter, and punishments certainly cannot be adjusted to suit the guilty one’s convenience. No, you will come here

at five o'clock tomorrow, and the next day, and on Friday too, and you will do your detentions as planned. I think it rather a good thing that you are missing something you really want to do. It ought to reinforce the lesson I am trying to teach you."

Harry felt the blood surge to his head and heard a thumping noise in his ears. So he told evil, nasty, attention-seeking stories, did he?

She was watching him with her head slightly to one side, still smiling widely, as though she knew exactly what he was thinking and was waiting to see whether he would start shouting again. With a massive effort Harry looked away from her, dropped his schoolbag beside the straight-backed chair, and sat down.

"There," said Umbridge sweetly, "we're getting better at controlling our temper already, aren't we? Now, you are going to be doing some lines for me, Mr. Potter. No, not with your quill," she added, as Harry bent down to open his bag. "You're going to be using a rather special one of mine. Here you are."

She handed him a long, thin black quill with an unusually sharp point.

"I want you to write '*I must not tell lies*,'" she told him softly.

"How many times?" Harry asked, with a creditable imitation of politeness.

"Oh, as long as it takes for the message to *sink in*," said Umbridge sweetly. "Off you go."

She moved over to her desk, sat down, and bent over a stack of parchment that looked like essays for marking. Harry raised the sharp black quill and then realized what was missing.

"You haven't given me any ink," he said.

“Oh, you won’t need ink,” said Professor Umbridge with the merest suggestion of a laugh in her voice.

Harry placed the point of the quill on the paper and wrote: *I must not tell lies*.

He let out a gasp of pain. The words had appeared on the parchment in what appeared to be shining red ink. At the same time, the words had appeared on the back of Harry’s right hand, cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel — yet even as he stared at the shining cut, the skin healed over again, leaving the place where it had been slightly redder than before but quite smooth.

Harry looked around at Umbridge. She was watching him, her wide, toadlike mouth stretched in a smile.

“Yes?”

“Nothing,” said Harry quietly.

He looked back at the parchment, placed the quill upon it once more, wrote *I must not tell lies*, and felt the searing pain on the back of his hand for a second time; once again the words had been cut into his skin, once again they healed over seconds later.

And on it went. Again and again Harry wrote the words on the parchment in what he soon came to realize was not ink, but his own blood. And again and again the words were cut into the back of his hand, healed, and then reappeared the next time he set quill to parchment.

Darkness fell outside Umbridge’s window. Harry did not ask when he would be allowed to stop. He did not even check his watch. He knew she was watching him for signs of weakness and he was not going to show any, not even if he had to sit here all night, cutting open

his own hand with this quill. . . .

“Come here,” she said, after what seemed hours.

He stood up. His hand was stinging painfully. When he looked down at it he saw that the cut had healed, but that the skin there was red raw.

“Hand,” she said.

He extended it. She took it in her own. Harry repressed a shudder as she touched him with her thick, stubby fingers on which she wore a number of ugly old rings.

“Tut, tut, I don’t seem to have made much of an impression yet,” she said, smiling. “Well, we’ll just have to try again tomorrow evening, won’t we? You may go.”

Harry left her office without a word. The school was quite deserted; it was surely past midnight. He walked slowly up the corridor then, when he had turned the corner and was sure that she would not hear him, broke into a run.

He had not had time to practice Vanishing Spells, had not written a single dream in his dream diary, and had not finished the drawing of the bowtruckle, nor had he written his essays. He skipped breakfast next morning to scribble down a couple of made-up dreams for Divination, their first lesson, and was surprised to find a disheveled Ron keeping him company.

“How come you didn’t do it last night?” Harry asked, as Ron stared wildly around the common room for inspiration. Ron, who had been fast asleep when Harry got back to the dormitory, muttered something about “doing other stuff,” bent low over his parchment,

and scrawled a few words.

“That’ll have to do,” he said, slamming the diary shut. “I’ve said I dreamed I was buying a new pair of shoes, she can’t make anything weird out of that, can she?”

They hurried off to North Tower together.

“How was detention with Umbridge, anyway? What did she make you do?”

Harry hesitated for a fraction of a second, then said, “Lines.”

“That’s not too bad, then, eh?” said Ron.

“Nope,” said Harry.

“Hey — I forgot — did she let you off for Friday?”

“No,” said Harry.

Ron groaned sympathetically.

It was another bad day for Harry; he was one of the worst in Transfiguration, not having practiced Vanishing Spells at all. He had to give up his lunch hour to complete the picture of the bowtruckle, and meanwhile, Professors McGonagall, Grubbly-Plank, and Sinistra gave them yet more homework, which he had no prospect of finishing that evening because of his second detention with Umbridge. To cap it all, Angelina Johnson tracked him down at dinner again and, on learning that he would not be able to attend Friday’s Keeper tryouts, told him she was not at all impressed by his attitude and that she expected players who wished to remain on the team to put training before their other commitments.

“I’m in detention!” Harry yelled after her as she stalked away. “D’you think I’d rather be stuck in a room with that old toad or playing Quidditch?”

“At least it’s only lines,” said Hermione consolingly, as Harry sank back onto his bench and looked down at his steak-and-kidney pie, which he no longer fancied very much. “It’s not as if it’s a dreadful punishment, really . . .”

Harry opened his mouth, closed it again, and nodded. He was not really sure why he was not telling Ron and Hermione exactly what was happening in Umbridge’s room: He only knew that he did not want to see their looks of horror; that would make the whole thing seem worse and therefore more difficult to face. He also felt dimly that this was between himself and Umbridge, a private battle of wills, and he was not going to give her the satisfaction of hearing that he had complained about it.

“I can’t believe how much homework we’ve got,” said Ron miserably.

“Well, why didn’t you do any last night?” Hermione asked him. “Where were you anyway?”

“I was . . . I fancied a walk,” said Ron shiftily.

Harry had the distinct impression that he was not alone in concealing things at the moment.

The second detention was just as bad as the previous one. The skin on the back of Harry’s hand became irritated more quickly now, red and inflamed; Harry thought it unlikely to keep healing as effectively for long. Soon the cut would remain etched in his hand and Umbridge would, perhaps, be satisfied. He let no moan of pain escape him, however, and from the moment of entering the room to the moment of his dismissal, again past midnight, he said nothing but “Good

evening” and “Good night.”

His homework situation, however, was now desperate, and when he returned to the Gryffindor common room he did not, though exhausted, go to bed, but opened his books and began Snape’s moonstone essay. It was half-past two by the time he had finished it. He knew he had done a poor job, but there was no help for it; unless he had something to give in he would be in detention with Snape next. He then dashed off answers to the questions Professor McGonagall had set them, cobbled together something on the proper handling of bowtruckles for Professor Grubbly-Plank, and staggered up to bed, where he fell fully clothed on top of the bed covers and fell asleep immediately.

Thursday passed in a haze of tiredness. Ron seemed very sleepy too, though Harry could not see why he should be. Harry’s third detention passed in the same way as the previous two, except that after two hours the words “*I must not tell lies*” did not fade from the back of Harry’s hand, but remained scratched there, oozing droplets of blood. The pause in the pointed quill’s scratching made Professor Umbridge look up.

“Ah,” she said softly, moving around her desk to examine his hand herself. “Good. That ought to serve as a reminder to you, oughtn’t it? You may leave for tonight.”

“Do I still have to come back tomorrow?” said Harry, picking up his schoolbag with his left hand rather than his smarting right.

“Oh yes,” said Professor Umbridge, smiling widely as before. “Yes, I think we can etch the message a little deeper with another evening’s work.”

He had never before considered the possibility that there might be another teacher in the world he hated more than Snape, but as he walked back toward Gryffindor Tower he had to admit he had found a contender. *She's evil*, he thought, as he climbed a staircase to the seventh floor, *she's an evil, twisted, mad, old* —

“Ron?”

He had reached the top of the stairs, turned right, and almost walked into Ron, who was lurking behind a statue of Lachlan the Lanky, clutching his broomstick. He gave a great leap of surprise when he saw Harry and attempted to hide his new Cleansweep Eleven behind his back.

“What are you doing?”

“Er — nothing. What are *you* doing?”

Harry frowned at him.

“Come on, you can tell me! What are you hiding here for?”

“I’m — I’m hiding from Fred and George, if you must know,” said Ron. “They just went past with a bunch of first years, I bet they’re testing stuff on them again, I mean, they can’t do it in the common room now, can they, not with Hermione there.”

He was talking in a very fast, feverish way.

“But what have you got your broom for, you haven’t been flying, have you?” Harry asked.

“I — well — well, okay, I’ll tell you, but don’t laugh, all right?” Ron said defensively, turning redder with every second. “I-I thought I’d try out for Gryffindor Keeper now I’ve got a decent broom. There. Go on. Laugh.”

“I’m not laughing,” said Harry. Ron blinked. “It’s a brilliant idea!

It'd be really cool if you got on the team! I've never seen you play Keeper, are you good?"

"I'm not bad," said Ron, who looked immensely relieved at Harry's reaction. "Charlie, Fred, and George always made me Keep for them when they were training during the holidays."

"So you've been practicing tonight?"

"Every evening since Tuesday . . . just on my own, though, I've been trying to bewitch Quaffles to fly at me, but it hasn't been easy and I don't know how much use it'll be." Ron looked nervous and anxious. "Fred and George are going to laugh themselves stupid when I turn up for the tryouts. They haven't stopped taking the mickey out of me since I got made a prefect."

"I wish I was going to be there," said Harry bitterly, as they set off together toward the common room.

"Yeah, so do — Harry, what's that on the back of your hand?"

Harry, who had just scratched his nose with his free right hand, tried to hide it, but had as much success as Ron with his Cleansweep.

"It's just a cut — it's nothing — it's —"

But Ron had grabbed Harry's forearm and pulled the back of Harry's hand up level with his eyes. There was a pause, during which he stared at the words carved into the skin, then he released Harry, looking sick.

"I thought you said she was giving you lines?"

Harry hesitated, but after all, Ron had been honest with him, so he told Ron the truth about the hours he had been spending in Umbridge's office.

"The old hag!" Ron said in a revolted whisper as they came to a

halt in front of the Fat Lady, who was dozing peacefully with her head against her frame. "She's sick! Go to McGonagall, say something!"

"No," said Harry at once. "I'm not giving her the satisfaction of knowing she's got to me."

"Got to you? You can't let her get away with this!"

"I don't know how much power McGonagall's got over her," said Harry.

"Dumbledore, then, tell Dumbledore!"

"No," said Harry flatly.

"Why not?"

"He's got enough on his mind," said Harry, but that was not the true reason. He was not going to go to Dumbledore for help when Dumbledore had not spoken to him once since last June.

"Well, I reckon you should —" Ron began, but he was interrupted by the Fat Lady, who had been watching them sleepily and now burst out, "Are you going to give me the password or will I have to stay awake all night waiting for you to finish your conversation?"

Friday dawned sullen and sodden as the rest of the week. Though Harry glanced toward the staff table automatically when he entered the Great Hall, it was without real hope of seeing Hagrid and he turned his mind immediately to his more pressing problems, such as the mountainous pile of homework he had to do and the prospect of yet another detention with Umbridge.

Two things sustained Harry that day. One was the thought that it

was almost the weekend; the other was that, dreadful though his final detention with Umbridge was sure to be, he had a distant view of the Quidditch pitch from her window and might, with luck, be able to see something of Ron's tryout. These were rather feeble rays of light, it was true, but Harry was grateful for anything that might lighten his present darkness; he had never had a worse first week of term at Hogwarts.

At five o'clock that evening he knocked on Professor Umbridge's office door for what he sincerely hoped would be the final time, was told to enter and did so. The blank parchment lay ready for him on the lace-covered table, the pointed black quill beside it.

"You know what to do, Mr. Potter," said Umbridge, smiling sweetly over at him.

Harry picked up the quill and glanced through the window. If he just shifted his chair an inch or so to the right . . . On the pretext of shifting himself closer to the table he managed it. He now had a distant view of the Gryffindor Quidditch team soaring up and down the pitch, while half a dozen black figures stood at the foot of the three high goalposts, apparently awaiting their turn to Keep. It was impossible to tell which one was Ron at this distance.

I must not tell lies, Harry wrote. The cut in the back of his right hand opened and began to bleed afresh.

I must not tell lies. The cut dug deeper, stinging and smarting.

I must not tell lies. Blood trickled down his wrist.

He chanced another glance out of the window. Whoever was defending the goalposts now was doing a very poor job indeed. Katie Bell scored twice in the few seconds Harry dared watch. Hoping

very much that the Keeper wasn't Ron, he dropped his eyes back to the parchment dotted with blood.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

He looked up whenever he thought he could risk it, when he could hear the scratching of Umbridge's quill or the opening of a desk drawer. The third person to try out was pretty good, the fourth was terrible, the fifth dodged a Bludger exceptionally well but then fumbled an easy save. The sky was darkening so that Harry doubted he would be able to watch the sixth and seventh people at all.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

The parchment was now shining with drops of blood from the back of his hand, which was searing with pain. When he next looked up, night had fallen and the Quidditch pitch was no longer visible.

"Let's see if you've gotten the message yet, shall we?" said Umbridge's soft voice half an hour later.

She moved toward him, stretching out her short be-ringed fingers for his arm. And then, as she took hold of him to examine the words now cut into his skin, pain seared, not across the back of his hand, but across the scar on his forehead. At the same time, he had a most peculiar sensation somewhere around his midriff.

He wrenched his arm out of her grip and leapt to his feet, staring at her. She looked back at him, a smile stretching her wide, slack mouth.

"Yes, it hurts, doesn't it?" she said softly.

He did not answer. His heart was thumping very hard and fast. Was she talking about his hand or did she know what he had just felt in his

forehead?

“Well, I think I’ve made my point, Mr. Potter. You may go.”

He caught up his schoolbag and left the room as quickly as he could.

Stay calm, he told himself as he sprinted up the stairs. *Stay calm, it doesn’t necessarily mean what you think it means.* . . .

“*Mimulus mimbletonia!*” he gasped at the Fat Lady, who swung forward once more.

A roar of sound greeted him. Ron came running toward him, beaming all over his face and slopping butterbeer down his front from the goblet he was clutching.

“Harry, I did it, I’m in, I’m Keeper!”

“What? Oh — brilliant!” said Harry, trying to smile naturally, while his heart continued to race and his hand throbbed and bled.

“Have a butterbeer.” Ron pressed a bottle onto him. “I can’t believe it — where’s Hermione gone?”

“She’s there,” said Fred, who was also swigging butterbeer, and pointed to an armchair by the fire. Hermione was dozing in it, her drink tipping precariously in her hand.

“Well, she said she was pleased when I told her,” said Ron, looking slightly put out.

“Let her sleep,” said George hastily. It was a few moments before Harry noticed that several of the first years gathered around them bore unmistakable signs of recent nosebleeds.

“Come here, Ron, and see if Oliver’s old robes fit you,” called Katie Bell. “We can take off his name and put yours on instead. . . .”

As Ron moved away, Angelina came striding up to Harry.

“Sorry I was a bit short with you earlier, Potter,” she said abruptly. “It’s stressful, this managing lark, you know, I’m starting to think I was a bit hard on Wood sometimes.” She was watching Ron over the rim of her goblet with a slight frown on her face.

“Look, I know he’s your best mate, but he’s not fabulous,” she said bluntly. “I think with a bit of training he’ll be all right, though. He comes from a family of good Quidditch players. I’m banking on him turning out to have a bit more talent than he showed today, to be honest. Vicky Frobisher and Geoffrey Hooper both flew better this evening, but Hooper’s a real whiner, he’s always moaning about something or other, and Vicky’s involved in all sorts of societies, she admitted herself that if training clashed with her Charm Club she’d put Charms first. Anyway, we’re having a practice session at two o’clock tomorrow, so just make sure you’re there this time. And do me a favor and help Ron as much as you can, okay?”

He nodded and Angelina strolled back to Alicia Spinnet. Harry moved over to sit next to Hermione, who awoke with a jerk as he put down his bag.

“Oh, Harry, it’s you. . . . Good about Ron, isn’t it?” she said blearily. “I’m just so — so — so tired,” she yawned. “I was up until one o’clock making more hats. They’re disappearing like mad!”

And sure enough, now that he looked, Harry saw that there were woolly hats concealed all around the room where unwary elves might accidentally pick them up.

“Great,” said Harry distractedly, if he did not tell somebody soon, he would burst. “Listen, Hermione, I was just up in Umbridge’s office and she touched my arm. . . .”

Hermione listened closely. When Harry had finished she said slowly, "You're worried that You-Know-Who's controlling her like he controlled Quirrell?"

"Well," said Harry, dropping his voice, "it's a possibility, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," said Hermione, though she sounded unconvinced. "But I don't think he can be *possessing* her the way he possessed Quirrell, I mean, he's properly alive again now, isn't he, he's got his own body, he wouldn't need to share someone else's. He could have her under the Imperius Curse, I suppose . . ."

Harry watched Fred, George, and Lee Jordan juggling empty butterbeer bottles for a moment. Then Hermione said, "But last year your scar hurt when nobody was touching you, and didn't Dumbledore say it had to do with what You-Know-Who was feeling at the time? I mean, maybe this hasn't got anything to do with Umbridge at all, maybe it's just coincidence it happened while you were with her?"

"She's evil," said Harry flatly. "Twisted."

"She's horrible, yes, but . . . Harry, I think you ought to tell Dumbledore your scar hurt."

It was the second time in two days he had been advised to go to Dumbledore and his answer to Hermione was just the same as his answer to Ron.

"I'm not bothering him with this. Like you just said, it's not a big deal. It's been hurting on and off all summer — it was just a bit worse tonight, that's all —"

"Harry, I'm sure Dumbledore would *want* to be bothered by this

—”

“Yeah,” said Harry, before he could stop himself, “that’s the only bit of me Dumbledore cares about, isn’t it, my scar?”

“Don’t say that, it’s not true!”

“I think I’ll write and tell Sirius about it, see what he thinks —”

“Harry, you can’t put something like that in a letter!” said Hermione, looking alarmed. “Don’t you remember, Moody told us to be careful what we put in writing! We just can’t guarantee owls aren’t being intercepted anymore!”

“All right, all right, I won’t tell him, then!” said Harry irritably. He got to his feet. “I’m going to bed. Tell Ron for me, will you?”

“Oh no,” said Hermione, looking relieved, “if you’re going that means I can go without being rude too, I’m absolutely exhausted and I want to make some more hats tomorrow. Listen, you can help me if you like, it’s quite fun, I’m getting better, I can do patterns and bobbles and all sorts of things now.”

Harry looked into her face, which was shining with glee, and tried to look as though he was vaguely tempted by this offer.

“Er . . . no, I don’t think I will, thanks,” he said. “Er — not tomorrow. I’ve got loads of homework to do . . .”

And he traipsed off to the boys’ stairs, leaving her looking slightly disappointed behind him.

Detensie by Dolores

Daardie aand is etenstyd in die Groot Saal vir Harry nie 'n plesier nie. Die nuus oor sy onderonsie met Umbridge het besonder vinnig versprei, selfs volgens Hogwarts-standaarde. Waar hy tussen Ron en Hermien sit en eet, hoor hy oral om hom studente fluister. En dit lyk of dit die fluisteraars glad nie skeel as hy hoor wat hulle sê nie. Intendeel, dis asof hulle hoop hy vererg hom en begin weer skree sodat hulle sy weergawe eerstehands kan hoor.

“Hy sê hy’t gesien hoe Cedric Diggory vermoor word . . .”

“Hy was glo in 'n tweeveg met Jy-Weet-Wie . . .”

“Moenie simpel wees nie . . .”

“Wie dink hy bluf hy?”

“Gee my krag . . .”

“Wat ek nie verstaan nie,” sê Harry deur sy tande terwyl hy sy mes en vurk neersit (sy hande bewee te erg om sy messegoed stil te hou), “is hoekom almal die storie twee maande gelede geglo het toe Dompeldorius dit vir hulle vertel het –”

“Die ding is, Harry, ek’s nie seker hulle het nie,” sê Hermien knorrig. “Kom ons loop net.”

Sy sit haar mes en vurk hard neer. Ron kyk verlangend na sy halfgeëte appeltiert, maar volg haar voorbeeld. Studente staar na hulle toe hulle uit die Saal stap.

“Wat bedoel jy jy’s nie seker hulle het vir Dompeldorius geglo nie?” vra Harry toe hulle by die eerste verdieping se trapportaal kom.

“Luister, jy weet nie hoe dit ná die tyd was nie,” sê Hermien stadig. “Jy het in die middel van die grasperk met Cedric se doolie liggaam verskyn, niemand van ons het gesien wat in die doolhof gebeur het nie . . . Ons het net Dompeldorius se woord dat Jy-Weet-Wie teruggekom en vir Cedric vermoor en teen jou geveg het.”

“Wat waar is!” sê Harry hard.

“Ek weet dit is, Harry, sal jy asseblief ophou om my kop af te byt?” sê Hermien moeg. “Dis net dat almal vir die vakansie huis toe is voor die waarheid kon insink. En daar moes hulle twee

maande lank lees hoe mal jy is en dat Dompeldorius seniel raak!"

Die reën hamer teen die ruite toe hulle deur die leë gange na die Griffindor-toring stap. Dit voel vir Harry of sy eerste dag al 'n week lank geduur het, maar hy het nog 'n berg huiswerk voor hy kan gaan slaap. 'n Dowwe hoofpyn klop bokant sy regteroog. Toe hulle by die Vet Vrou se gang indraai, kyk hy deur die natgereënde venster oor die donker terrein. Daar is nog steeds geen lig in Hagrid se hut nie.

"*Mimbulus mimbletonia*," sê Hermien voor die Vet Vrou kan vra. Die portret swaai oop, die opening verskyn en hulle klouter deur.

Die geselskamer is so te sê leeg. Omtrent almal eet nog. Kromskeen gly uit 'n leunstoel en kom spin-spin nader. Toe Harry, Ron en Hermien in hul gunstelingstoele by die kaggel gaan sit, wip hy op Hermien se skoot en krul soos 'n wollerige gemmerkleur kussing daarin op. Harry staar na die vlamme. Hy is doodmoeg.

"Hoe kon Dompeldorius dit toelaat?" sê Hermien skielik, sodat Harry en Ron wip. Kromskeen spring van haar skoot af en lyk verontwaardig. Hermien slaan die leunstoel se arms so hard dat stukkie stopsel deur die gate peul. "Hoe kan hy dat daardie aaklige vrou vir ons klasgee? En dit in ons UIL-jaar!"

"Wel, ons het nog nooit juis wonderlike onderwysers vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste gehad nie, het ons?" sê Harry. "Jy weet mos wat die probleem is. Dis soos Hagrid sê, niemand wil die werk hê nie, almal sê dis vervloek."

"Ja, maar om iemand in diens te neem wat weier om ons te laat toor! Watse speletjie speel Dompeldorius?"

"En sy probeer mense kry om vir haar te spioeneer," sê Ron geheimsinnig. "Onthou julle, sy't gesê ons moet vir haar vertel as iemand sê Jy-Weet-Wie is terug."

"Natuurlik is sy hier om op ons almal te spioeneer, dis tog duidelik, hoekom anders sal Broddelwerk haar hier wil hê?" snou Hermien.

"Moet net nie weer begin baklei nie," sê Harry moeg toe Ron sy mond oopmaak om terug te kap. "Kan ons nie kom ons doen ons huiswerk dat dit klaarkom?"

Hulle gaan haal hul skoolsakke en gaan terug na die stoele voor die vuur. Mense is besig om terug te kom ná aandete. Harry kyk met opset nie na die portretopening nie, maar hy kan nog steeds voel hoe sommige na hom staar.

"Sal ons Snerp s'n eerste doen?" vra Ron. Hy dompel sy veerpen in die inktpot. "*Die eienskappe van maanstene en hul gebruik in towerdrankies*" prewel hy terwyl hy die woorde boaan sy perkament skryf. "Reg." Hy trek 'n streep onder die titel en

kyk vol verwagting na Hermien. "So, wat is die eienskappe van maanstene en hul gebruik in towerdrankies?"

Maar Hermien hoor nie. Sy tuur na die oorkant van die vertrek waar Fred, George en Lee Jordaan in die middel van 'n groep eerstejaartjies sit wat iets kou wat waarskynlik uit die groot papiersak op Fred se skoot kom.

Sy spring op. "Nee, ek is jammer, hulle gaan te ver." Sy lyk smoor-kwaad. "Kom, Ron."

"Ek – wat?" vra Ron, wat duidelik vir tyd speel. "Nee – komaan, Hermien – ons kan hulle nie uitskel oor hulle lekkers uitdeel nie."

"Jy weet goed dis Neusbloei-nougat of – of Braakbomme of –"

"Flouvrage?" sê Harry.

Die eerstejaars sak een vir een bewusteloos in hul stoele neer asof hulle met 'n onsigbare hamer oor die kop geslaan is. Party gly af op die vloer, ander val oor die stoele se arms met tonge wat uithang. Die meeste mense lag. Maar Hermien lig haar ken en marsjeer na Fred en George, wat met aanknipborde rondstaan en die eerstejaars noukeurig dophou. Ron kom halfpad orent, aarsel 'n paar oomblikke en mompel dan vir Harry: "Sy het dit onder beheer." Toe laat sak hy sy lang lyf so laag moontlik in sy stoel.

"Dis genoeg!" sê Hermien afgemete vir Fred en George, wat albei verbaas opkyk.

"Ja, jy's reg," George knik. "Die dosis lyk sterk genoeg, hè?"

"Ek het vanoggend vir julle gesê julle kan nie julle gemors op studente toets nie!"

"Ons betaal hulle!" sê Fred verontwaardig.

"Dit traak my nie. Dis gevaarlik!"

"Twak," sê Fred.

"Bedaar, Hermien, hulle is oukei!" troos Lee. Hy stap van eerstejaar tot eerstejaar en steek pers lekkers in hul oop monde.

"Ja, kyk, hulle kom al weer by," sê George.

'n Paar van die eerstejaars roer inderdaad. Party lyk so geskok toe hulle sien dat hulle op die grond lê of oor hul stoele hang dat Harry besef Fred en George het nie vir hulle gesê wat die lekkers doen nie.

"Is jy oukei?" vra George vir 'n klein donkerkopdogtertjie wat voor sy voete lê.

"Hm – ek dink so," sê sy bawerig.

"Uitstekend," sê Fred tevrede, maar Hermien gryp sowel sy aanknipbord as die papiersak vol Flouvrage uit sy hande.

"Dit is NIE uitstekend nie!"

"Natuurlik is dit, hulle lewe nog, nie waar nie!" sê Fred ergerlik.

"Julle kan dit nie doen nie, wat as een van hulle erg siek word?"

"Ons maak hulle nie siek nie, ons het alles reeds op onself getoets, dis net om te sien of almal dieselfde reageer –"

"As julle nie ophou nie, gaan ek vir julle –"

"Detensie gee?" sê Fred in 'n ek-wil-jou-dit-sien-probeer-stem.

"Laat uitskryf?" George grynslag.

Oral in die vertrek lag mense. Hermien rig haarself tot haar volle lengte op, haar oë is op skrefies getrek en haar krulhare staan asof vol elektrisiteit om haar kop.

"Nee," sê sy in 'n stem wat van woede bewe, "maar ek sal vir julle ma skryf."

"Jy sal nie," sê George geskok en gee 'n tree agteruit.

"O ja, ek sal," sê Hermien grimmig. "Ek kan julle nie keer as julle die simpel goed self wil eet nie, maar julle gaan dit nie vir die eerstejaars voer nie."

Fred en George lyk totaal uit die veld geslaan. Dis duidelik dat Hermien se dreigement in hulle oë niks anders as vuilspel is nie. Met 'n laaste dreigende kyk druk Hermien Fred se aanknipbord en die sak Flouvrate in sy arms en stap met lang treë terug na haar stoel by die vuur.

Ron sit nou so laag in sy stoel dat sy neus omtrent regoor sy knieë is.

"Dankie vir jou ondersteuning, Ron," sê Hermien suur.

"Jy het dit baie goed hanteer," brom Ron.

Hermien staan vir 'n paar oomblikke na die skoon stuk perkament op haar skoot. Dan sê sy geïrriteerd: "Dit help nie, ek kan nie nou konsentreer nie. Ek gaan slaap."

Sy ruk haar sak oop. Harry dink sy gaan haar boeke wegpak, maar sy haal twee misvormde wolvoorwerpe uit, sit dit versigtig op die tafel voor die kaggel neer, maak dit met 'n paar opgefrommelde stukkies perkament en 'n gebreekte veerpen toe en staan terug om te kyk hoe dit lyk.

"Wat in die naam van Merlin doen jy?" vra Ron, wat haar dophou asof hy reken sy is besig om haar varkies te verloor.

"Dis hoede vir die huiselwe," sê Hermien flink terwyl sy nou haar boeke in haar sak pak. "Ek het dit tydens die vakansie gemaak. Ek brei baie stadig as ek nie mag toor nie, maar noudat ek weer by die skool is, sal ek baie meer kan maak."

"Jy sit hoede vir die huiselwe uit?" sê Ron stadig. "En jy pak dit toe met rommel?"

"Ja," sê Hermien uitdagend en swaai haar sak op haar rug.

"Dis nie reg nie," sê Ron kwaai. "Jy probeer hulle met 'n slap riem

vry, sodat hulle die hoede per ongeluk sal optel. Jy maak hulle vry al wil hulle dalk nie eens vry wees nie."

"Natuurlik wil hulle vry wees!" sê Hermien dadelik, hoewel haar gesig, pienk word. "Waag dit net om aan daardie hoede te raak, Ron!"

Sy swaai om en stap uit. Ron wag tot sy deur die ingang na die musics se slaapsale verdwyn het voor hy die rommel van die wolhoede afhaal.

"Hulle moet ten minste kan sien wat hulle optel," sê hy beslis. "In elk geval..." hy rol die perkament op waarop hy die titel van Snerp se opstel geskryf het, "dit sal nie help om dit te probeer klaarmaak sonder Hermien nie. Ek het nie die vaagste benul wat 'n mens met maanstene doen nie, en jy?"

Harry skud sy kop en kom agter dat die pyn in sy regterslaap eger geword het. Hy dink aan die lang opstel oor reuseoorloë en 'n skerp steekpyn skiet deur sy kop. Hy weet goed hy gaan die volgende oggend spyt wees dat sy huiswerk nie klaar is nie, maar hy pak nogtans sy boeke weg.

"Ek gaan ook bed toe."

Op pad na die deur wat na die slaapsale lei, stap hy verby Septimus, maar hy kyk nie na hom nie. Dit lyk vir 'n vlietende oomblik of Septimus iets wil sê, maar Harry wil nie verder getreiter word nie. Hy versnel sy pas en draf met die klipwenteltrap op boontoe.

Die volgende dag is net so loodgrys en reënerig soos die vorige een. Hagrid is nog steeds nie by die personeeltafel met ontbyt nie.

"Maar aan die positiewe kant, geen Snerp vandag nie," sê Ron in sy noppies.

Hermien gaap groot en skink vir haarself koffie. Sy lyk in haar skik oor iets en toe Ron wil weet waarom, sê sy eenvoudig: "Die hoede is weg. Dit lyk of die huiselwe tog vry wil wees."

"Ek weet nie," sê Ron snydend. "Daardie goed tel dalk nie as klere nie. Hulle't nie vir my soos hoede gelyk nie, meer soos wolsakke."

Hermien praat die res van die oggend nie met hom nie.

Dubbele Towerspreuke word gevolg deur dubbele Transfigurasie. Professor Flickerpitt en professor McGonagall gebruik albei die eerste vyftien minute van die lesse om vir die klas te preek oor die belangrikheid van hul UILE.

"Wat julle moet onthou," piep die klein professor Flickerpitt, wat soos altyd op 'n stapel boeke moet sit om oor sy lessenaar te kan sien, "is dat hierdie eksamen jul toekoms vir baie jare kan beïnvloed! As julle nie reeds ernstig oor jul loopbane besin het nie, is dit nou die

tyd om dit te doen. En intussen, is ek bevrees, sal ons harder as ooit moet werk om seker te maak dat julle goed presteer!"

Hulle hersien die Ontbiedtowerspreuk vir 'n volle uur. Volgens professor Flickerpitt gaan dit beslis in hul UIL wees. Hy rond die klas af deur vir hulle meer Towerspreukhuiswerk as ooit tevore te gee.

Dit gaan net so, indien nie erger nie, in Transfigurasië.

"Julle sal nie die UIL slaag," sê professor McGonagall grimmig, "as julle nie hard werk, oefen en studeer nie. Ek sien geen rede hoekom almal in hierdie klas nie 'n UIL vir Transfigurasië kan kry as julle die nodige werk doen nie." Neville maak 'n skeptiese geluid. "Ja, jy ook, Loggerenberg," sê professor McGonagall. "Daar skeel niks met jou werk nie, behalwe 'n gebrek aan selfvertroue. Dus . . . vandag begin ons met Verdwyntowerspreuke. Hulle is makliker as Optowerspreuke, wat julle eers op OTTe-vlak sal aandurf, maar dis nog steeds van die moeilikste toerwerk waarvoor julle op UIL-vlak getoets gaan word."

Sy is heeltemal reg. Harry vind die Verdwyntowerspreuk verskriklik moeilik. Aan die einde van die dubbele periode het hy en Ron dit nog glad nie reggekry om hul slakke te laat verdwyn nie, hoewel Ron reken syne lyk 'n bietjie bleker. Hermien aan die ander kant het haar slak met die derde probeerslag laat verdwyn en so 'n tienpuntbonus vir Griffindor verdien. Sy is die enigste een wat nie huiswerk kry nie. Al die ander moet die towerspreuk daardie aand oefen vir 'n tweede aanslag op hul slakke die volgende middag.

Harry en Ron begin paniekerig raak oor die hoeveelheid huiswerk wat hulle moet doen en bring hul etensuur in die biblioteek deur waar hulle die gebruike van maanstene in towerdrankies naslaan. Hermien is nog steeds kwaad vir Ron oor sy aanmerkings oor die wolhoede en gaan nie saam nie.

Toe hulle die middag Versorging van Magiese Kreature het, is Harry se kop van voor af seer. Die dag het koel en effens winderig geword. Terwyl hulle met die skuinste af na Hagrid se hut aan die kant van die Verbode Woud stap, voel hulle elke nou en dan 'n paar reëndruppels teen hul gesigte.

Professor Growweblaar staan ongeveer tien tree van Hagrid se voordeur vir die klas en wag. Voor haar staan 'n lang opslaantafel waarop 'n hoop stokkies lê. Toe Ron en Harry daar kom, hoor hulle 'n harde gelag agter hulle. Hulle kyk om en sien vir Draco Malfoy, omring deur sy Slibberin-trawante. Hy moet iets gesê het wat baie snaaks is, want Krabbe, Goliat, Pansy Parkinson en die ander giggel onbedaarlik terwyl hulle om die tafel gaan staan. Aan

die manier waarop hulle na Harry kyk, is dit maklik om af te lei vir wie hulle lag.

"Is almal hier?" blaf professor Growweblaar toe al die Slibberins en Griffindors opgedaag het. "Kom ons begin. Wie kan vir my sê wat ons hierdie goed noem?"

Sy wys na die hoop stokkies voor haar. Hermien se hand skiet in die lug. Malfoy boots haar agter haar rug na: hy spring met uitstaande gretig op en af asof hy nie kan wag om te antwoord nie. Pansy Parkinson skree van die lag, wat 'n kreet word toe die stokkies op die tafel skielik opspring. Hulle lyk soos houtkabouterijtjies met knop- perige bruin arms en bene, twee stokkerige vingertjies aan elke hand en snaakse plat basagtige gesiggies waarin kewebruin ogies glinster.

"Ooooo!" adem Parvati en Hildegard.

Dit irriteer Harry vreeslik. Hulle maak asof Hagrid nooit vir hulle interessante diere gewys het nie. Goed, hy moet toegee dat die flobber- wurms 'n bietjie vervelig was, maar die salamanders en hippogriewe was baie interessant en die spuitstertkrewels dalk té interessant.

"Moenie skree nie, meisies!" sê professor Growweblaar skerp en sprinkel 'n hand vol iets wat soos bruinrys lyk tussen die stokkies- wesens. Hulle val dadelik daaraan weg. "Nou – weet enigiemand wat dit is? Juffrou La Grange?"

"Takkruiers," sê Hermien. "Hulle is bewakers van bome en kom gewoonlik in towerstafbome voor."

"Vyf punte vir Griffindor," sê professor Growweblaar. "Ja, hulle is takkruiers en soos juffrou La Grange tereg gesê het, hulle woon gewoonlik in bome met hout van towerstafkwaliteit. Weet enigiemand wat hulle eet?"

"Houtluise," sê Hermien dadelik, wat verduidelik hoekom die goed wat Harry gedink het ryskorrels is, beweeg. "Maar ook fee- eiers as hulle dit kan kry."

"Mooi so, nog vyf punte. As jy ooit blare of hout by 'n boom moet versamel waarin 'n takkruiers woon, is dit verstandig om 'n geskenk van houtluise saam te neem om sy aandag af te lei of om hom te kalmeer. Hulle lyk dalk nie gevaarlik nie, maar as jy hulle kwaad maak, kan hulle probeer om jou oë uit te krap. Soos julle kan sien, is hulle vingers baie skerp en moet liewer ver van jou oë wegge- hou word. Nou toe, staan nader, neem 'n paar houtluise en 'n tak- kruiper – hier is genoeg dat julle drie-drie kan saamwerk – en bestudeer hulle van naderby. Aan die einde van die les moet elkeen 'n skets met byskrifte van al die liggaamsdele ingee."

Die klas drom om die tafel saam. Harry stap met opset agterom sodat hy langs professor Growweblaar staan.

“Waar is Hagrid?” vra hy vir haar terwyl die res van die klas takkruipers uitsoek.

“Moet jou nie daaroor bekommer nie,” sê professor Growweblaar afwysend net soos die vorige keer toe Hagrid nie vir sy klas opgedaag het nie.

Daar is 'n breë grynsag op Draco Malfoy se skerp gesig. Hy leun oor Harry en gryp die grootste takkruiper.

“Dalk,” sê Malfoy in 'n lae stem sodat net Harry kan hoor, “het die dom lummel baie seergekry.”

“Dalk sal jy as jy nie jou mond hou nie,” sê Harry uit die hoek van sy mond.

“Dalk meng hy in met goed wat te groot is vir hom, as jy weet wat ek bedoel.”

Malfoy grynsag oor sy skouer toe hy wegstap en Harry voel skielik siek. Weet Malfoy iets? Sy pa is per slot van rekening 'n Doodseter. Wat as hy iets oor Hagrid weet wat die Orde nog nie te hore gekom het nie? Hy stap vinnig na Ron en Hermien, wat 'n entjie daarvandaan op die gras hurk en 'n takkruiper probeer oorreed om lank genoeg stil te sit sodat hulle hom kan teken. Harry haal 'n perkament en veerpen uit, hurk by hulle en vertel in 'n fluisterstem wat Malfoy nou net gesê het.

“Dompeldorius sal weet as iets met Hagrid gebeur het,” sê Hermien dadelik. “Moenie lyk of jy bekommerd is nie, dis net wat Malfoy wil hê. Dan weet hy ons weet nie eintlik wat aangaan nie. Ons moet hom ignoreer, Harry. Hier, hou die takkruiper vas sodat ek sy gesig kan teken.”

“Ja,” styg Malfoy se dralende stem uit die groep naaste aan hulle, “Vader het 'n paar dae gelede met die Minister gepraat, weet julle, en dit klink of die Ministerie vasberade is om iets te doen aan die lae vlak van onderrig by hierdie plek. As daardie oorvrote moroon sy gesig hier wys, sal hy waarskynlik dadelik weggejaag word.”

“EINA!”

Harry het die takkruiper so hard vasgedruk dat hy amper in twee gebreek het, en uit weerwraak met sy skerp vingers na Harry gekap het. Harry laat hom val. Daar is twee diep snye aan sy hand. Krabbe en Goliath, wat geskater het oor Malfoy se uitlating oor Hagrid, lag nog harder toe die takkruiper na die Woud laat spat en tussen die boomwortels verdwyn. Toe die klok in die verte lui, rol Harry sy bloedbesmeerde tekening op en stap na die Herbologie-klas, sy hand toegedraai in Hermien se sakdoek en met Malfoy se honende lag in sy ore.

“As hy weer vir Hagrid 'n moroon noem...” sê Harry deur geknersde tande.

"Harry, moenie met Malfoy sukkel nie. Onthou, hy's 'n prefek, hy kan die lewe vir jou moeilik maak."

"Sjoe, ek wonder hoe dit sal voel om 'n moeilike lewe te hê?" sê Harry sarkasties. Ron lag, maar Hermien frons. Hulle stap saam deur die groentetuin. Dit lyk of die weer nog steeds nie kan besluit of dit gaan reën of nie.

"Ek wens net Hagrid wil opskud en terugkom, dis al," sê Harry onderlangs toe hulle by die kweekhuise kom. "En *moenie* sê daardie growweblaar-vroumens is 'n beter onderwyser nie!" voeg hy dreigend by.

"Ek was nie van plan nie," sê Hermien kalm.

"Want sy's nie naastenby so goed soos Hagrid nie," sê Harry beslis, hoewel hy goed weet dat hy so pas 'n uitstekende Versorging van Magiese Creature-les gehad het. Natuurlik laat dit hom net nog kwater voel.

Die deur van die naaste kweekhuis gaan oop en 'n klomp vierdejaars stroom uit, Ginny ook.

"Hallo," sê sy vrolik toe hulle verbystap. Mania Goedlief kom heel laaste uit. Daar is 'n smeersel grond oor haar neus en haar hare is in 'n knoets bo-op haar kop vasgemaak. Toe sy vir Harry sien, peul haar groot oë opgewonde uit en sy pyl op hom af. Verskeie van sy klasmaats bly nuuskierig staan.

Mania trek haar asem diep in en sê sonder om te groet: "Ek hoor Jy-Weet-Wie is terug en ek hoor jy't met hom geveg en weggekom."

"Hm – ja," sê Harry ongemaklik. Mania dra oorbelle wat soos oranje radyse lyk. Parvati en Hildegard het dit dadelik opgelet, want hulle giggel en wys na haar ore.

"Julle kan maar lag," sê Mania en haar stem word hoog. Blykbaar dink sy Parvati en Hildegard lag vir haar woorde en nie vir haar oorbelle nie. "Maar mense het ook geglo daar is nie goed soos Blibberende Katoeters of Frommelhoring Snorklappe nie."

"Wel, hulle was reg, dan nie?" sê Hermien ongeduldig. "Daar is nie goed soos Blibberende Katoeters en Frommelhoring Snorklappe nie."

Mania kyk vernietigend na haar en stap met swaaiende radyse weg. Parvati en Hildegard is nie die enigste mense wat nou skree van die lag nie.

"Sal jy probeer om nie weer die paar mense wat my glo te beledig nie?" sê Harry toe hulle die klas binnestap.

"Ag, in vadersnaam, Harry, jy kan beter doen as sy," sê Hermien. "Ginny het my alles van haar vertel. Sy glo net in goed waarvoor

daar geen bewyse is nie. Wel, wat verwag jy van iemand wie se pa Die Vitter uitgee?"

Harry dink aan die sinistere geveleelde perde wat hy met hul aankoms gesien het en hoe Mania gesê het sy kan hulle ook sien. Sy moed sak. Het sy gejoj? Hy wonder nog hieroor toe Ernie Macmillan nader stap.

"Ek wil hê jy moet weet, Potter," sê hy in 'n welluidende stem "dat dit nie net malles is wat jou glo nie. Ek glo jou eenhonderd persent. My pa-hulle het nog altyd vir Dompeldorius ondersteun en ek ook."

"Hm – baie dankie, Ernie," sê Harry uit die veld geslaan, maar tog in sy skik. Ernie kan soms baie hoogdrawend wees, maar Harry is baie bly dat iemand sonder swaaiende radyse aan die ore hom ook glo. Ernie se woorde vee die glimlag van Hildegard Braun se gesig af, maar toe Harry na Ron en Hermien draai om iets vir hulle te sê, sien hy Septimus se uitdrukking. Hy lyk tegelyk verward en uitdagend.

Niemand is verbaas toe professor Spruit hul les begin deur vir hulle te vertel hoe belangrik hul Uile is nie. Harry wens die onderwysers wil ophou om dit te doen. Hy kry 'n benoude kramp op sy maag elke keer dat hy aan al sy huiswerk dink, 'n gevoel wat erger word toe professor Spruit aan die einde van die les vir hulle nog 'n opstel gee. Die Griffindors strompel 'n uur en 'n half later terug kasteel toe, moeg en besmeer met stinkende draakmis, professor Spruit se gunstelingbemestingstof. Dit was 'n lang dag en niemand is lus vir praat nie.

Harry is rasend honger en aangesien hy om vyfuur by Umbridge moet wees vir sy eerste detensie, gaan hy reguit Saal toe vir aandete sonder om eers sy sak na die Griffindor-toring te neem. Hy is skaars by die ingang toe 'n harde, kwaai stem agter hom sê: "Haai, Potter!"

"Wat nou weer?" brom hy. Hy kyk om en sien vir Angelina Johnson. Dit lyk of sy wil ontplof.

"Ek sal jou sê wat nou weer." Sy marsjeer na hom en druk haar vinger hard teen sy bors. "Hoe het jy dii reggekry om detensie om vyfuur op Vrydag te hê?"

"Wat?" sê Harry. "Waarvan o ja, die Wagterproewe!"

"Nou onthou hy," snou Angelina. "Het ek nie vir jou gesê ek wil hê die hele span moet aan die proewe deelneem sodat ek iemand kan kry wat by almal pas nie? Het ek nie gesê ek het die Kwiddiekveld spesiaal bespreek nie? En nou het jy staan en besluit jy gaan nie daar wees nie!"

"Ek het nie besluit ek gaan nie daar wees nie!" sê Harry, geskok deur die onbillikheid van die argument. "Ek het detensie by daardie

Umbridge-vroumens gekry net omdat ek vir haar die waarheid vertel het oor Jy-Weet-Wie."

"Wel, jy kan reguit na haar gaan en vir haar vra of jy Vrydag kan alkry," sê Angelina kwaai. "Ek gee nie om hoe jy dit doen nie. Sê vir haar Jy-Weet-Wie is iets wat jy uitgedink het as jy moet, sorg net dat jy daar is!"

Sy draai op haar hakke om en storm weg.

"Weet julle wat?" sê Harry vir Ron en Hermien toe hulle die Groot Saal binnestap. "Ek dink ons moet by Puddlemore United gaan uitvind of Oliver Wood nie tydens 'n oefening dood is nie, want dit lyk of hy vir Angelina oorgeneem het."

"Wat dink jy is die kans dat Umbridge jou Vrydag gaan afgee?" sê Ron skepties toe hulle aan die Griffindor-tafel gaan sit.

"Minder as nul," sê Harry bedruk. Hy lig 'n paar lamstjops op sy bord en begin eet. "Maar ek moet seker probeer, nè? Ek sal aanbied om nog twee detensies te doen of so iets, ek weet nie." Hy sluk 'n mond vol aartappel. "Ek hoop nie sy hou my vanaand te lank besig nie. Ek moet nog drie opstelle skryf, McGonagall se Verdwyn-towerspreuk oefen, 'n teentowerspreuk vir Flickerpitt uitwerk, die tekening van die takkruiper klaarmaak en Trelawney se simpel droomdagboek begin."

Ron kreun en staar na die plafon.

"En dit lyk of dit begin reën het," sê hy.

"Wat het dit met huiswerk uit te waai?" vra Hermien met geligte wenkbroue.

"Niks," sê Ron dadelik en sy ore word rooi.

Om vyf voor vyf groet Harry die ander twee en gaan na Umbridge se kantoor op die derde verdieping. Hy klop aan die deur en sy roep in 'n stroperige stem: "Kom binne."

Hy gaan in en kyk versigtig rond. Drie ander mense het al hierdie kantoor bewoon. Toe dit Gilderoy Lockhart s'n was, was dit beplak met stralende selfportrette. Toe Lupin hier gebly het, was daar gewoonlik 'n interessante Donker kreatuur in 'n hok of in 'n tenk. Die bedrieër in Moodie se plek het allerhande instrumente en toestelle gehad vir die opspoor van misdaad en vermoommings.

Nou lyk dit onherkenbaar anders. Al die oppervlaktes is toegesgooi met kantoortreksels en doeke. Daar is etlike vase met gedroogde blomme, elk op sy eie doilie. Teen een van die mure hang 'n versameling ornamentele borde elk versier met 'n groot of helder-kleurige kat met verskillende soorte strikke om hul nekke. Dis so walglik dat Harry gefassineer daarna staar tot professor Umbridge hom aanspreek.

“Goeienaand, meneer Potter.”

Harry skrik en kyk om. Hy het haar nie dadelik raak gesien nie. Sy dra 'n bont geblomde kleed wat besonder goed met die tafeldoek op die lessenaar agter haar saamsmelt.

“Goeienaand, professor Umbridge,” sê Harry stroef.

“Wel, sit gerus,” sê sy en wys na 'n klein tafeltjie met 'n kantdoek waarby 'n regop stoel staan. 'n Vel skoon perkament lê op die tafel vir Harry en wag.

“Hm,” sê Harry sonder om te roer. “Professor Umbridge. Hm – voor ons begin, wil ek – wil ek 'n guns vra.”

Haar uitpeuloë vernou.

“Ja?”

“Wel, ek is . . . ek is in die Griffindor-kwiddieksplan. En ek moet Vrydag om vyfuur by die proewe vir die nuwe Wagter wees en ek – ek het gewonder of ek detensie daardie aand kan oorslaan en dit – eerder op 'n ander aand kan doen . . .”

Harry weet lank voor die einde van sy sin dat dit hopeloos is.

“O nee,” sê Umbridge en sy glimlag so breed dat dit lyk of sy 'n besonder sappige vlieg ingesluk het. “O nee, nee, nee. Jy word gestraf vir die agterbakse stories wat jy versprei om aandag te trek, meneer Potter, en straf kan ongelukkig nie aangepas word net omdat dit nie vir die oortreder genieslik is nie. Nee, jy sal hier wees om vyfuur môreaand en die volgende dag en ook op Vrydag en jy sal jou detensie doen soos dit opgelê is. Ek dink dis 'n goeie ding dat jy iets misloop wat jy regtig graag wil doen. Dit kan die les wat ek jou wil leer net versterk.”

Harry voel hoe die bloed na sy kop styg en hoor 'n kloppende geluid in sy ore. So hy vertel “agterbakse stories om aandag te trek”?

Professor Umbridge hou hom dop, haar kop effens skuins gedraai en 'n breë glimlag op haar gesig, asof sy weet wat hy dink en wil sien of hy weer op haar gaan skree. Dis met inspanning dat Harry wegkyk, sy sak langs die stoel laat val en gaan sit.

“Hm,” sê Umbridge soet, “ons raak al klaar beter met selfbeheersing, nê? Goed, jy gaan vir my uitskryf, meneer Potter. Nee, nie met jou veerpen nie,” voeg sy by toe Harry oorbuk om sy sak oop te maak. “Jy gaan my baie spesiale pen gebruik. Hier.”

Sy gee vir hom 'n lang dun swart veerpen met 'n besonder skerp punt aan.

“Ek wil hê jy moet ‘Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie’, skryf,” sê sy sag.

“Hoeveel keer?” vra Harry. Hy doen sy bes om beleef te klink.

“O, vir so lank as wat dit neem vir die boodskap om in te sink,” lispel Umbridge. “Jy mag begin.”

Sy stap na haar lessenaar, gaan sit en buk oor 'n stapel perkament wat lyk soos opstelle wat nagesien moet word. Harry tel die swart veerpen op en besef dan wat skort.

“Ek het nie ink nie,” sê hy.

“O, jy het nie ink nodig nie,” sê professor Umbridge met iets soos 'n laggie in haar stem.

Harry druk die veerpen se punt teen die perkament en skryf: *Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie.*

Hy snak van pyn. Die woorde het in blink rooi ink op die perkament verskyn. Terselfdertyd verskyn dit agterop Harry se regterhand, asof dit met 'n skalpel in sy vel gekerf is. Terwyl hy na die wond kyk, genees die vel dadelik sodat die plek effens rooier as tevore maar andersins heeltemal glad is.

Harry kyk om na Umbridge. Sy hou hom dop, 'n breë glimlag om haar padda-agtige mond.

“Ja?”

“Niks,” sê Harry stroef.

Hy kyk terug na die perkament, sit die veerpen weer daarop neer en skryf *Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie.* Vir die tweede keer voel hy die brandpyn agterop sy hand. Die woorde word weer in sy hand gesny en die wond genees weer binne 'n paar sekondes.

So gaan dit voort. Harry skryf die woorde oor en oor op die perkament, terwyl hy gou besef dis in sy eie bloed en nie in ink nie. Oor en oor word die woorde op die agterkant van sy hand uitge-sny, om gesond te word en opnuut te verskyn wanneer hy verder skryf.

Dit word donker voor Umbridge se venster. Harry vra nie wanneer hy mag ophou nie. Hy kyk nie eens hoe laat dit is nie. Hy weet sy hou hom dop vir 'n teken van swakheid en hy is vasberade om niks te wys nie, selfs al moet hy sy hand die hele nag met hierdie veerpen stukkend sny.

“Kom hier,” sê sy ná wat soos ure voel.

Harry staan op. Sy hand brand verskriklik. Hy kyk daarna en sien dat die vel rooi en rou lyk, hoewel dit genees het.

“Hand,” sê sy.

Harry steek sy hand uit en sy neem dit in hare. Hy onderdruk 'n rilling toe haar dik stomp vingers vol lelike ou ringe aan hom raak.

“T-t, dit lyk nie of ek al 'n indruk op jou gemaak het nie,” sê sy en glimlag. “Wel, ons sal maar net môreand weer moet probeer, of hoe? Jy mag gaan.”

Harry stap sonder 'n woord uit. Die skool is doodstil, dis waarskynlik al ná middernag. Hy stap stadig met die gang op, maar

begin hardloop toe hy om die draai is en seker is sy kan hom nie hoor nie.

Harry kon nie sy Verdwyntowerspreuk oefen nie, hy het nie 'n enkele droom in sy droomdagboek geskryf nie, die tekening van die takkruiper is nie klaar nie en hy het nie een van sy opstelle geskryf nie. Die volgende oggend slaan hy ontbyt oor sodat hy 'n paar opgemaakte drome vir Waarsêery, hul eerste les, kan neerskryf. Hy is verbaas toe Ron, wat baie deur die slaap lyk, by hom aansluit.

"Hoekom het jy dit nie gisteraand gedoen nie?" vra Harry terwyl Ron wild in die geselskamer rondkyk vir inspirasie. Toe Harry die vorige nag in die slaapsaal kom, was Ron vas aan die slaap. Ron brom iets oor goeters wat hy moes doen, buk laag oor sy perkament en skryf iets neer.

"Dit moet net goed genoeg wees," sê hy en klap sy dagboek toe. "Ek sê ek het gedroom ek koop 'n paar nuwe skoene, sy kan nie iets simpels daarin lees nie, kan sy?"

Hulle draf na die Noordtoring.

"Hoe was die detensie by Umbridge toe? Wat moes jy doen?"

Harry aarsel vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde voor hy sê: "Uitskryf."

"Dis darem nie te erg nie, hè?"

"Nee."

"Haai – ek't vergeet – het sy jou afgegee vir Vrydag?"

"Nee," sê Harry.

Ron kreun simpatiek.

Dis nog 'n slegte dag vir Harry. Hy is een van die swakstes in Transfigurasië omdat hy nie die Verdwyntowerspreuk geoefen het nie. Hy gee sy middagete prys om die tekening van die takkruiper klaar te maak en intussen gee professors McGonagall, Growweblaar en Sinistra vir hulle nog huiswerk, wat hy beslis nie daardie aand sal kan doen nie omdat hy vir sy tweede detensie na Umbridge moet gaan. Om alles te kroon, spoor Angelina Johnson hom weer ná aandete op en toe sy hoor dat hy nie Vrydag by die Wagterproewe sal wees nie, sê sy dat sy houding haar nie beïndruk nie en dat sy verwag dat spelers wat in die span wil bly oefeninge voor ander verpligtinge sal stel.

"Ek het detensie!" skree Harry agterna toe sy wegstap. "Dink jy ek wil eerder in 'n vertrek by daardie ou padda wees as om buite Kwiddiek te speel?"

"Dis darem net uitskryf," sê Hermien troostend toe Harry gaan sit en na sy bieff-en-niertjiepastei staar, waarvoor hy nie nou meer lus is nie. "Dis nie asof dit die een of ander gruwelike straf is nie . . ."

Harry maak sy mond oop, maak dit weer toe en knik. Hy weet nie hoekom hy nie vir Ron en Hermien wil vertel wat in Umbridge se kantoor gebeur het nie, hy weet net hy wil nie die afgryse op hulle gesigte sien nie. Dit sal alles net erger maak en nog moeiliker om te verduur. Hy voel ook dis op 'n manier 'n stryd tussen hom en Umbridge, wil teen wil, en hy weier dat sy moet uitvind dat hy daaroor gekla het.

"Ek kan nie glo dat ons soveel huiswerk kan hê nie," sê Ron misnoestig.

"Wel, hoekom het jy dit nie gisteraand gedoen nie?" vra Hermien. "Waar was jy in elk geval?"

"Ek was . . . ek het gaan stap," sê Ron ontwykend.

Harry kry die gevoel dat hy nie die enigste een is wat dinge wegsteek nie.

Die tweede detensie is net so erg soos die vorige een. Die vel agterop Harry se hand word hierdie keer vinniger geïrriteer en is gou rooi en ontsteek. Harry kan sien dat dit kort voor lank nie meer sal genees nie. Binnekort sal die snye daar bly. Dan sal Umbridge seker tevrede wees. Hy sorg dat hy nie wys hoe seer dit is nie en van die oomblik dat hy daar instap tot hy weer ná middernag mag gaan, sê hy net "goeienaand" en "goeienag".

Sy huiswerksituasie is egter nou kritiek. Hoewel hy doodmoeg is toe hy by die Griffindor-toring kom, bly hy op, maak sy boeke oop en begin met Snerp se opstel oor maanstene. Dis halfdrie toe hy klaar is. Hy weet dis swak, maar dis beter as niks. As hy niks het om in te handig nie, sal Snerp ook vir hom detensie gee. Hy skryf antwoorde vir die vrae wat professor McGonagall gestel het, slaan iets saam oor die behoorlike hantering van takkruipers vir professor Growweblaar, steier bed toe en raak onmiddellik in sy klere bo-op die beddegoed aan die slaap.

Donderdag gaan in 'n waas van moegheid verby. Ron is ook baie vaak, hoewel Harry nie kan verstaan hoekom nie. Harry se derde detensie verloop net soos die vorige twee, behalwe dat die woorde "Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie" ná twee uur nie meer van sy hand verdwyn nie, maar daar bly en oor alles bloei. Toe sy veerpen stil word, kyk professor Umbridge op.

"A," sê sy sag en stap om haar lessenaar om sy hand te bekyk. "Mooi. Dit sal jou altyd daaraan herinner. Jy mag gaan."

"Moet ek nog steeds môre kom?" vra Harry en tel sy sak met sy gesonde linkerhand op.

“O ja,” sê professor Umbridge en glimlag breed. “Ja, nog ’n aandjie se werk sal die boodskap ’n bietjie dieper kerf.”

Harry sou nooit kon dink dat daar ’n onderwyser kan wees wat hy meer haat as Snerp nie, maar toe hy terugstap na die Griffindortoring moet hy erken dat hy ’n sterk aanspraakmaker gevind het. Sy is boos, dink hy terwyl hy die trappe na die sewende verdieping klim, ’n gemene, aaklige, mal ou –

“Ron?”

Harry het bo gekom, regs gedraai en amper in Ron vasgeloop, wat met sy besem in sy hand agter Lachlan die Lange se standbeeld wegkruip. Ron wip verskrik toe hy vir Harry sien en probeer om sy nuwe Wegveeg Elf agter sy rug weg te steek.

“Wat maak jy?”

“Hm – niks. Wat maak jy?”

Harry bekyk hom fronsend. “Komaan, sê vir my! Hoekom kruip jy hier weg?”

“Ek – ek kruip vir Fred en George weg, as jy dan moet weet,” sê Ron. “Hulle is nou net hier verby met ’n paar eerstejaars. Ek wed hulle toets weer goeters op hulle. Ek bedoel, hulle kan dit nie meer in die geselskamer doen nie – nie met Hermien nie.”

Hy praat baie vinnig en senuagtig.

“Maar wat maak jy met jou besem? Het jy gevlieg?”

“Ek – wel – oukei, ek sal vir jou sê, maar jy mag nie lag nie, hoor?” sê Ron verdedigend. Hy word by die sekonde rooier. “Ek – ek het gedink ek sal vir Griffindor-Wagter probeer noudat ek ’n ordentlike besem het. Toe. Lag maar.”

“Hoekom sal ek lag?” sê Harry en Ron knipper sy oe. “Dis ’n briljante idee! Dit sal regtig cool wees as jy in die span is. Ek het jou nog nooit Wagter sien speel nie. Is jy goed?”

“Ek’s nie sleg nie,” sê Ron en hy lyk verlig. “Charlie, Fred en George laat my altyd Wagter speel as hulle in die vakansies wil oefen.”

“Dan het jy vanaand geoefen?”

“Ek oefen nog elke aand, al van Dinsdag af – so op my eie. Ek het die Swelgers probeer toor om na my toe te vlieg, maar dit werk nie so lekker nie.” Ron lyk senuagtig en angstig. “Fred en George gaan hulle slap lag as ek vir die proewe opdaag. Hulle het nog nie opgehou om my te terg vandat ek prefek is nie.”

“Ek wens ek kon daar wees,” sê Harry bitter toe hulle saam na die geselskamer stap.

“Ja, ek ook – Harry, wat’s agterop jou hand?”

Harry, wat pas sy neus gekrap het, probeer sy regterhand wegsteek, maar kry dit net so goed reg as Ron met sy Wegveeg.

“Dis net ’n sny – dis niks – dis –”

Maar Ron gryp Harry se arm en hou die agterkant van sy hand voor sy oë. Dis stil terwyl hy die uitgekerfde woorde lees. Hy lyk siek toe hy Harry se hand los.

“Ek dag jy’t gesê sy laat jou uitskryf?”

Harry aarsel, maar dan onthou hy dat Ron eerlik was met hom, plus vertel hy vir Ron die waarheid.

“Die ou heks!” sê Ron in ’n gewalgde fluisterstem toe hulle voor die Vet Vrou se portret gaan staan. Die Vet Vrou sit en slaap met haar kop teen die raam. “Sy’s siek! Gaan na McGonagall. Sê iets!”

“Nee,” sê Harry dadelik. “Ek gaan haar nie die satisfaksie gee om te dink sy’t gewen nie.”

“Gewen? Jy kan haar nie hiermee laat wegkom nie!”

“Ek weet nie of McGonagall enige mag oor haar het nie.”

“Dompeldorius dan, sê vir Dompeldorius.”

“Nee,” sê Harry pront.

“Hoekom nie?”

“Hy’t genoeg bekommernisse,” sê Harry, hoewel dit nie regtig die rede is nie. Hy sál nie na Dompeldorius gaan nie. Dompeldorius het sedert Junie nog nie eens met hom gepraat nie.

“Wel, ek dink jy moet –” begin Ron, maar die Vet Vrou wat hulle slaperig dophou, val hom in die rede.

“Gaan julle die wagwoord gee of moet ek die hele nag wakker bly tot julle klaar gepraat het?”

Vrydag is net so triestig en nat soos die res van die week. Hoewel Harry outomaties na die personeeltafel kyk toe hy by die Groot Saal instap, verwag hy nie meer om vir Hagrid daar te sien nie. Buitendien het hy groter sorge, soos die berg huiswerk wat hy moet doen en die vooruitsig van nog ’n detensie by Umbridge.

Daardie dag hou twee ligstraaltjies Harry aan die gang. Die een is die gedagte dat dit amper naweek is, die ander een dat hoewel sy laaste detensie by Umbridge beslis aaklig gaan wees, die Kwid-diekveld in die verte sigbaar is. As die geluk aan sy kant is, sal hy iets van Ron se proewe kan sien. Dis flou ligstraaltjies, maar Harry is dankbaar vir enigiets wat die duisternis van sy gemoed kan verlig. Hy het nog nooit ’n erger eerste week by Hogwarts beleef nie.

Daardie aand om vyfuur klop hy aan professor Umbridge se kantoor deur vir wat hy van harte hoop die laaste keer is. Hy word aangesê om in te kom. Die skoon perkament lê en wag op die kantbedekte tafel en die skerp veerpen lê langsaan.

“Jy weet wat om te doen, meneer Potter,” sê Umbridge en glimlag soet vir hom.

Harry tel die veerpen op en kyk deur die venster. As hy sy stoel net effens na regs skuif, sal hy maak of hy nader aan die tafel wil kom, en kry dit reg. Nou kan hy die Griffindor-kwiddiekspeel in die verte heen en weer oor die veld sien vlieg. Aan die voet van die hoë doelpale staan ’n halfdosyn swart figure en wag op hul beurt as Wagter. Dis te ver om te sien watter een is Ron.

Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie, skryf Harry. Die snye agterop sy regterhand gaan oop en begin weer bloei.

Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie. Die snye word dieper en brand verskriklik.

Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie. Bloed drup oor sy pols.

Hy loer weer deur die venster. Wie ook al op die oomblik die doelpale verdedig, vaar regtig nie goed nie. Katie Bell behaal twee doele in die paar sekondes wat Harry dit waag om te kyk. Hy hoop van harte dis nie Ron nie terwyl sy oë na die bloedbesmeerde perkament sak.

Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie.

Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie.

Hy kyk op wanneer hy dink hy kan dit waag, soos wanneer hy Umbridge se veerpen hoor krap of haar laai hoor oopgaan. Die derde persoon is baie goed, die vierde is treurig, die vyfde ontwyk ’n Moker besonder goed, maar mors ’n maklike keerslag op. Die lug word donker en Harry twyfel of hy die sesde en sewende mense sal kan sien.

Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie.

Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie.

Die perkament is vol bloedkolle en die agterkant van sy hand brand soos vuur. Toe hy weer opkyk, is dit donker en hy kan nie meer die Kwiddieksveld sien nie.

“Kom ons kyk of jy die boodskap gekry het,” sê Umbridge se stroperige stem ’n halfuur later.

Sy stap nader en vat Harry se hand vas met haar stomp, beringde vingers. Die oomblik toe sy aan hom raak, gaan ’n skietpyn nie deur sy hand nie, maar deur die litteken op sy voorkop en iets snaaks gebeur iewers by sy middellyf.

Hy draai sy arm uit haar greep, spring orent en staan geskok na haar. Sy kyk met dieselfde breë glimlag om haar slap lippe na hom.

“Ja, dis seer, né?” sê sy sag.

Harry antwoord nie. Sy hart klop baie hard en vinnig. Praat sy oor sy hand of weet sy van die pyn wat hy so pas in sy voorkop gevoel het?

“Wel, ek dink ek het my punt gemaak, meneer Potter. Jy mag gaan.”

Hy tel sy skoolsak op en stap so vinnig moontlik uit.

Kalm bly, sê hy vir homself toe hy met die trappe ophardloop. Kalm bly, dit beteken nie noodwendig wat jy dink nie.

“*Mimulus mibletonia!*” hyg hy toe hy by die Vet Vrou kom, wat duidelik oopswaai.

’n Groot gejuig begroet hom. Ron kom nader gehardloop met ’n stralende glimlag en Botterbier wat oor die kant van sy beker stort.

“Harry, ek het dit reggekry! Ek’s in, ek’s Wagter!”

“Wat? O – fantasties!” sê Harry en probeer gewoonweg glimlag ten spyte van die pyn in sy bloeiende hand en sy hart wat nog steeds wild klop.

“Kry ’n Botterbier.” Ron gee vir hom ’n bottel aan. “Ek kan dit nie glo nie – waar’s Hermien?”

“Sy’s daar oorkant,” sê Fred, wat ook Botterbier drink. Hy wys na ’n leunstoel by die vuur. Hermien sit en slaap. Haar Botterbier hang gevaarlik skeef in haar hand.

“Wel, sy’t gesê sy’s bly toe ek haar vertel het,” sê Ron en hy lyk effens afgehaal.

“Los haar,” sê George vinnig. Dit neem ’n rukkie voor Harry oplet dat ’n hele paar van die eerstejaars lyk of hul neuse onlangs gebloeit het.

“Kom hier, Ron,” sê Katie Bell. “Kyk of Oliver se ou kleed vir jou pas, ons kan sy naam afhaal en joune aanwerk.”

Toe Ron wegstap, kom Angelina haastig na Harry.

“Ek is jammer ek was vroeër so goor met jou, Potter,” sê sy kortaf. “Om kaptein te wees, is nogal stresvol, weet jy, ek begin dink ek was soms ’n bietjie kwaai met Wood.” Sy kyk met ’n effense frons oor haar beker se rand na Ron.

“Luister, ek weet hy’s jou beste pël, maar hy’s nie wonderlik nie,” sê sy eerlik. “Ek dink met ’n bietjie afrigting sal hy oukei wees. Hy kom uit ’n gesin van goeie Kwiddiekspelers. Ek maak daarop staat dat hy meer talent het as hoe dit vandag gelyk het. Vicky Visser en Geoffrey Hooper het albei beter as hy gevlieg, maar Hooper is ’n kermkous wat altyd iets het om oor te kla en Vicky behoort aan allerhande verenigings. En sy’t gesê as die Kwiddiek-oefeninge met haar Towerspreukklub bots, sal sy eerder Towerspreuke toe gaan. In elk geval, ons oefen môremiddag om twee-uur. Sorg dat jy hierdie keer daar is. En doen my ’n guns. Help vir Ron soveel moontlik, oukei?”

Harry knik en Angelina stap terug na Alicia Spinnet. Harry gaan sit langs Hermien, wat wakker skrik toe hy sy sak neersit.

“O, Harry, dis jy . . . dis gaaf van Ron, nè?” sê sy vaak. “Ek’s net so – so – moeg,” gaap sy. “Ek was laas nag tot eenuur op om nog hoede te maak. Dis ongelooflik hoe hulle verdwyn!”

En sowaar, net waar Harry kyk, sien hy wolhoede wat so weggesteek is dat die elwe hulle per ongeluk moet optel.

“Gaaf,” sê Harry afgetrokke. As hy nie nou vir iemand vertel nie, gaan hy ontplof. “Hoor hier, Hermien, ek was nou net in Umbridge se kantoor en sy’t aan my arm geraak . . .”

Hermien luister aandagtig. Toe Harry klaar is, sê sy stadig: “Dink jy Jy-Weet-Wie beheer haar soos hy vir Quirrell beheer het?”

“Wel,” sê Harry en sy stem sak, “dis ’n moontlikheid, nie waar nie?”

“Is seker,” sê Hermien, hoewel sy nie oortuig klink nie. “Maar ek dink nie hy kan haar besit soos hy vir Quirrell besit het nie. Ek bedoel, hy’s nou weer heeltemal lewend en hy’t sy eie liggaam, hy hoef nie iemand anders s’n te deel nie. Ek weet nie, dalk het hy haar onder die Imperius-vloek gesit . . .”

Harry kyk ’n rukkie hoe Fred, George en Lee Jordaan leë Botterbierbottels in die lug gooi en vang. Dan sê Hermien: “Maar verlede jaar was jou litteken seer al het niemand aan jou geraak nie. Het Dompeldorius nie toe gesê dit het iets te doen met hoe Jy-Weet-Wie op daardie oomblik voel nie? Ek bedoel, dalk het dit niks met Umbridge uit te waai nie, dalk is dit blote toeval dat dit gebeur het terwyl jy by haar was?”

“Sy’s gruwelik,” sê Harry pront. “Sy’s siek.”

“Sy’s aaklig, ja, maar . . . Harry, ek dink jy moet vir Dompeldorius gaan sê dat jou litteken seer is.”

Dis die tweede keer in twee dae dat iemand hom aanraai om na Dompeldorius te gaan en hy gee vir Hermien dieselfde antwoord as vir Ron.

“Ek gaan hom nie hiermee pla nie. Soos jy gesê het, dis dalk net toevallig. Dis al die hele somer elke nou en dan seer – dit was net gisteraand ’n bietjie erger, dis al –”

“Harry, ek is seker Dompeldorius sal hiervan wil weet –”

“Ja,” sê Harry voor hy homself kan keer, “dis ook al van my waaroor Dompeldorius omgee. My litteken.”

“Moenie so praat nie, dis nie waar nie!”

“Ek dink ek sal vir Sirius skryf en hoor wat hy sê –”

“Harry, jy kan nie so iets in ’n brief sit nie!” sê Hermien ontsteld. “Onthou jy nie dat Moodie gesê het ons moet versigtig wees wat ons skryf nie? Daar is geen waarborg dat die uile nie iewers onderskep word nie!”

“Oukei, oukei, ek sal nie vir hom sê nie!” sê Harry geïrriteerd. Hy kom orent. “Ek gaan slaap. Sê vir Ron, sal jy?”

“O nee,” sê Hermien verlig. “As jy gaan, beteken dit ek kan ook gaan sonder om ongeskik te lyk. Ek is poegaai en ek wil môre nog hoede maak. Luister, hoekom help jy my nie? Dis groot pret, ek raak al beter, ek kan al patrone en tossels en allerhande soorte goed maak.”

Harry kyk na haar stralende gesig en probeer lyk asof hy graag sou wou.

“Hm . . . nee, ek dink nie so nie, dankie,” sê hy. “Hm – nie môre nie. Ek het te veel huiswerk . . .”

Hermien bly staan met ’n teleurgestelde uitdrukking toe hy na die seuns se trappe stap.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



PERCY AND PADFOOT

Harry was the first to awake in his dormitory next morning. He lay for a moment watching dust swirl in the chink of sunlight falling through the gap in his four-poster's hangings and savored the thought that it was Saturday. The first week of term seemed to have dragged on forever, like one gigantic History of Magic lesson.

Judging by the sleepy silence and the freshly minted look of that beam of sunlight, it was just after daybreak. He pulled open the curtains around his bed, got up, and started to dress. The only sound apart from the distant twittering of birds was the slow, deep breathing of his fellow Gryffindors. He opened his schoolbag carefully, pulled out parchment and quill, and headed out of the dormitory for the common room.

Making straight for his favorite squashy old armchair beside the now extinct fire, Harry settled himself down comfortably and unrolled his parchment while looking around the room. The detritus of crumpled-up bits of parchment, old Gobstones, empty ingredient jars, and candy wrappers that usually covered the common room at the end of each day was gone, as were all Hermione's elf hats. Wondering vaguely how many elves had now been set free whether they wanted to be or not, Harry uncorked his ink bottle, dipped his quill into it, and then held it suspended an inch above the smooth yellowish surface of his parchment, thinking hard. . . . But after a minute or so he found himself staring into the empty grate, at a complete loss for what to say.

He could now appreciate how hard it had been for Ron and Hermione to write him letters over the summer. How was he supposed to tell Sirius everything that had happened over the past week and pose all the questions he was burning to ask without giving potential letter-thieves a lot of information he did not want them to have?

He sat quite motionless for a while, gazing into the fireplace, then, finally coming to a decision, he dipped his quill into the ink bottle once more and set it resolutely upon the parchment.

Dear Snuffles,

Hope you're okay, the first week back here's been terrible, I'm really glad it's the weekend!

We've got a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Umbridge. She's nearly as nice as your mum. I'm

writing because that thing I wrote to you about last summer happened again last night when I was doing a detention with Umbridge.

We're all missing our biggest friend, we hope he'll be back soon.

Please write back quickly.

Best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Harry". The letter 'H' is tall and thin, and the 'y' has a long, sweeping tail that extends downwards and to the right.

Harry reread this letter several times, trying to see it from the point of view of an outsider. He could not see how they would know what he was talking about — or who he was talking to — just from reading this letter. He did hope Sirius would pick up the hint about Hagrid and tell them when he might be back. Harry did not want to ask directly in case it drew too much attention to what Hagrid might be up to while he was not at Hogwarts.

Considering it was a very short letter it had taken a long time to write; sunlight had crept halfway across the room while he had been working on it, and he could now hear distant sounds of movement from the dormitories above. Sealing the parchment carefully he climbed through the portrait hole and headed off for the Owlery.

“I would *not* go that way if I were you,” said Nearly Headless Nick, drifting disconcertingly through a wall just ahead of him as he walked down the passage. “Peeves is planning an amusing joke on the next person to pass the bust of Paracelsus halfway down the corridor.”

“Does it involve Paracelsus falling on top of the person’s head?” asked Harry.

“Funnily enough, it *does*,” said Nearly Headless Nick in a bored voice. “Subtlety has never been Peeves’s strong point. I’m off to try and find the Bloody Baron. . . . He might be able to put a stop to it. . . . See you, Harry. . . .”

“Yeah, ’bye,” said Harry and instead of turning right, he turned left, taking a longer but safer route up to the Owlery. His spirits rose as he walked past window after window showing brilliantly blue sky; he had training later, he would be back on the Quidditch pitch at last —

Something brushed his ankles. He looked down and saw the caretaker’s skeletal gray cat, Mrs. Norris, slinking past him. She turned lamplike yellow eyes upon him for a moment before disappearing behind a statue of Wilfred the Wistful.

“I’m not doing anything wrong,” Harry called after her. She had the unmistakable air of a cat that was off to report to her boss, yet Harry could not see why; he was perfectly entitled to walk up to the Owlery on a Saturday morning.

The sun was high in the sky now and when Harry entered the Owlery the glassless windows dazzled his eyes; thick silvery beams of sunlight crisscrossed the circular room in which hundreds of owls nestled on rafters, a little restless in the early morning light, some clearly just returned from hunting. The straw-covered floor crunched a little as he stepped across tiny animal bones, craning his neck for a sight of Hedwig.

“There you are,” he said, spotting her somewhere near the very top

of the vaulted ceiling. "Get down here, I've got a letter for you."

With a low hoot she stretched her great white wings and soared down onto his shoulder.

"Right, I know this says 'Snuffles' on the outside," he told her, giving her the letter to clasp in her beak and, without knowing exactly why, whispering, "but it's for Sirius, okay?"

She blinked her amber eyes once and he took that to mean that she understood.

"Safe flight, then," said Harry and he carried her to one of the windows; with a moment's pressure on his arm Hedwig took off into the blindingly bright sky. He watched her until she became a tiny black speck and vanished, then switched his gaze to Hagrid's hut, clearly visible from this window, and just as clearly uninhabited, the chimney smokeless, the curtains drawn.

The treetops of the Forbidden Forest swayed in a light breeze. Harry watched them, savoring the fresh air on his face, thinking about Quidditch later . . . and then he saw it. A great, reptilian winged horse, just like the ones pulling the Hogwarts carriages, with leathery black wings spread wide like a pterodactyl's, rose up out of the trees like a grotesque, giant bird. It soared in a great circle and then plunged once more into the trees. The whole thing had happened so quickly Harry could hardly believe what he had seen, except that his heart was hammering madly.

The Owlery door opened behind him. He leapt in shock, and turning quickly, saw Cho Chang holding a letter and a parcel in her hands.

"Hi," said Harry automatically.

“Oh . . . hi,” she said breathlessly. “I didn’t think anyone would be up here this early. . . . I only remembered five minutes ago, it’s my mum’s birthday.”

She held up the parcel.

“Right,” said Harry. His brain seemed to have jammed. He wanted to say something funny and interesting, but the memory of that terrible winged horse was fresh in his mind.

“Nice day,” he said, gesturing to the windows. His insides seemed to shrivel with embarrassment. The weather. He was talking about the *weather*. . . .

“Yeah,” said Cho, looking around for a suitable owl. “Good Quidditch conditions. I haven’t been out all week, have you?”

“No,” said Harry.

Cho had selected one of the school barn owls. She coaxed it down onto her arm where it held out an obliging leg so that she could attach the parcel.

“Hey, has Gryffindor got a new Keeper yet?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “It’s my friend Ron Weasley, d’you know him?”

“The Tornado-hater?” said Cho rather coolly. “Is he any good?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “I think so. I didn’t see his tryout, though, I was in detention.”

Cho looked up, the parcel only half-attached to the owl’s legs.

“That Umbridge woman’s foul,” she said in a low voice. “Putting you in detention just because you told the truth about how — how — how he died. Everyone heard about it, it was all over the school. You were really brave standing up to her like that.”

Harry's insides reinflated so rapidly he felt as though he might actually float a few inches off the dropping-strewn floor. Who cared about a stupid flying horse, Cho thought he had been really brave. . . . For a moment he considered accidentally-on-purpose showing her his cut hand as he helped her tie her parcel onto her owl. . . . But the very instant that this thrilling thought occurred, the Owlery door opened again.

Filch, the caretaker, came wheezing into the room. There were purple patches on his sunken, veined cheeks, his jowls were aquiver and his thin gray hair disheveled; he had obviously run here. Mrs. Norris came trotting at his heels, gazing up at the owls overhead and mewling hungrily. There was a restless shifting of wings from above, and a large brown owl snapped his beak in a menacing fashion.

"Aha!" said Filch, taking a flat-footed step toward Harry, his pouchy cheeks trembling with anger. "I've had a tip-off that you are intending to place a massive order for Dungbombs!"

Harry folded his arms and stared at the caretaker.

"Who told you I was ordering Dungbombs?"

Cho was looking from Harry to Filch, also frowning; the barn owl on her arm, tired of standing on one leg, gave an admonitory hoot but she ignored it.

"I have my sources," said Filch in a self-satisfied hiss. "Now hand over whatever it is you're sending."

Feeling immensely thankful that he had not dawdled in posting off the letter, Harry said, "I can't, it's gone."

"Gone?" said Filch, his face contorting with rage.

"Gone," said Harry calmly.

Filch opened his mouth furiously, mouthed for a few seconds, then raked Harry's robes with his eyes. "How do I know you haven't got it in your pocket?"

"Because —"

"I saw him send it," said Cho angrily.

Filch rounded on her.

"You saw him —?"

"That's right, I saw him," she said fiercely.

There was a moment's pause in which Filch glared at Cho and Cho glared right back, then the caretaker turned and shuffled back toward the door. He stopped with his hand on the handle and looked back at Harry.

"If I get so much as a whiff of a Dungbomb . . ."

He stumped off down the stairs. Mrs. Norris cast a last longing look at the owls and followed him.

Harry and Cho looked at each other.

"Thanks," Harry said.

"No problem," said Cho, finally fixing the parcel to the barn owl's other leg, her face slightly pink. "You *weren't* ordering Dungbombs, were you?"

"No," said Harry.

"I wonder why he thought you were, then?" she said, as she carried the owl to the window.

Harry shrugged; he was quite as mystified by that as she was, though, oddly, it was not bothering him very much at the moment.

They left the Owlery together. At the entrance of a corridor that led

toward the west wing of the castle, Cho said, "I'm going this way. Well, I'll . . . I'll see you around, Harry."

"Yeah . . . see you."

She smiled at him and departed. He walked on, feeling quietly elated. He had managed to have an entire conversation with her and not embarrassed himself once. . . . *You were really brave standing up to her like that.* . . . She had called him brave. . . . She did not hate him for being alive. . . .

Of course, she had preferred Cedric, he knew that. . . . Though if he'd only asked her to the ball before Cedric had, things might have turned out differently. . . . She had seemed sincerely sorry that she had to refuse when Harry had asked her. . . .

"Morning," Harry said brightly to Ron and Hermione, joining them at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall.

"What are you looking so pleased about?" said Ron, eyeing Harry in surprise.

"Erm . . . Quidditch later," said Harry happily, pulling a large platter of bacon and eggs toward him.

"Oh . . . yeah . . ." said Ron. He put down the bit of toast he was eating and took a large swig of pumpkin juice. Then he said, "Listen . . . you don't fancy going out a bit earlier with me, do you? Just to — er — give me some practice before training? So I can, you know, get my eye in a bit . . ."

"Yeah, okay," said Harry.

"Look, I don't think you should," said Hermione seriously, "you're both really behind on homework as it —"

But she broke off; the morning post was arriving and, as usual, the

Daily Prophet was soaring toward her in the beak of a screech owl, which landed perilously close to the sugar bowl and held out a leg; Hermione pushed a Knut into its leather pouch, took the newspaper, and scanned the front page critically as the owl took off again.

“Anything interesting?” said Ron; Harry smiled — he knew Ron was keen to get her off the subject of homework.

“No,” she sighed, “just some guff about the bass player in the Weird Sisters getting married . . .”

She opened the paper and disappeared behind it. Harry devoted himself to another helping of eggs and bacon; Ron was staring up at the high windows, looking slightly preoccupied.

“Wait a moment,” said Hermione suddenly. “Oh no . . . Sirius!”

“What’s happened?” said Harry, and he snatched at the paper so violently that it ripped down the middle so that he and Hermione were holding half each.

“*‘The Ministry of Magic has received a tip-off from a reliable source that Sirius Black, notorious mass murderer . . . blah blah blah . . . is currently hiding in London!’*” Hermione read from her half in an anguished whisper.

“Lucius Malfoy, I’ll bet anything,” said Harry in a low, furious voice. “He *did* recognize Sirius on the platform . . .”

“What?” said Ron, looking alarmed. “You didn’t say —”

“Shh!” said the other two.

“. . . *Ministry warns Wizarding community that Black is very dangerous . . . killed thirteen people . . . broke out of Azkaban . . .*” the usual rubbish,” Hermione concluded, laying down her half of the paper and looking fearfully at Harry and Ron. “Well, he just won’t be

able to leave the house again, that's all," she whispered. "Dumbledore did warn him not to."

Harry looked down glumly at the bit of the *Prophet* he had torn off. Most of the page was devoted to an advertisement for Madame Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, which was apparently having a sale.

"Hey!" he said, flattening it down so Hermione and Ron could both see it. "Look at this!"

"I've got all the robes I want," said Ron.

"No," said Harry, "look . . . this little piece here . . ."

Ron and Hermione bent closer to read it; the item was barely an inch long and placed right at the bottom of a column. It was headlined:

TRESPASS AT MINISTRY

Sturgis Podmore, 38, of number two, Laburnum Gardens, Clapham, has appeared in front of the Wizengamot charged with trespass and attempted robbery at the Ministry of Magic on 31st August. Podmore was arrested by Ministry of Magic watchwizard Eric Munch, who found him attempting to force his way through a top-security door at one o'clock in the morning. Podmore, who refused to speak in his own defense, was convicted on both charges and sentenced to six months in Azkaban.

"Sturgis Podmore?" said Ron slowly, "but he's that bloke who looks like his head's been thatched, isn't he? He's one of the Ord—" "

“Ron, *shh!*” said Hermione, casting a terrified look around them.

“Six months in Azkaban!” whispered Harry, shocked. “Just for trying to get through a door!”

“Don’t be silly, it wasn’t just for trying to get through a door — what on earth was he doing at the Ministry of Magic at one o’clock in the morning?” breathed Hermione.

“D’you reckon he was doing something for the Order?” Ron muttered.

“Wait a moment . . .” said Harry slowly. “Sturgis was supposed to come and see us off, remember?”

The other two looked at him.

“Yeah, he was supposed to be part of our guard going to King’s Cross, remember? And Moody was all annoyed because he didn’t turn up, so that doesn’t seem like he was supposed to be on a job for them, does it?”

“Well, maybe they didn’t expect him to get caught,” said Hermione.

“It could be a frame-up!” Ron exclaimed excitedly. “No — listen!” he went on, dropping his voice dramatically at the threatening look on Hermione’s face. “The Ministry suspects he’s one of Dumbledore’s lot so — I dunno — they *lured* him to the Ministry, and he wasn’t trying to get through a door at all! Maybe they’ve just made something up to get him!”

There was a pause while Harry and Hermione considered this. Harry thought it seemed far-fetched; Hermione, on the other hand, looked rather impressed and said, “Do you know, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if that were true.”

She folded up her half of the newspaper thoughtfully. When Harry laid down his knife and fork she seemed to come out of a reverie.

“Right, well, I think we should tackle that essay for Sprout on Self-Fertilizing Shrubs first, and if we’re lucky we’ll be able to start McGonagall’s Inanimatus Conjuris before lunch . . .”

Harry felt a small twinge of guilt at the thought of the pile of homework awaiting him upstairs, but the sky was a clear, exhilarating blue, and he had not been on his Firebolt all week . . .

“I mean, we can do it tonight,” said Ron, as he and Harry walked down the sloping lawns toward the Quidditch pitch, their broomsticks over their shoulders, Hermione’s dire warnings that they would fail all their O.W.L.s still ringing in their ears. “And we’ve got tomorrow. She gets too worked up about work, that’s her trouble . . .” There was a pause and he added, in a slightly more anxious tone, “D’you think she meant it when she said we weren’t copying from her?”

“Yeah, I do,” said Harry. “Still, this is important too, we’ve got to practice if we want to stay on the Quidditch team. . .”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Ron in a heartened tone. “And we *have* got plenty of time to do it all . . .”

Harry glanced over to his right as they approached the Quidditch pitch, to where the trees of the Forbidden Forest were swaying darkly. Nothing flew out of them; the sky was empty but for a few distant owls fluttering around the Owlery Tower. He had enough to worry about; the flying horse wasn’t doing him any harm. He pushed it out of his mind.

They collected balls from the cupboard in the changing room and

set to work, Ron guarding the three tall goalposts, Harry playing Chaser and trying to get the Quaffle past Ron. Harry thought Ron was pretty good; he blocked three-quarters of the goals Harry attempted to put past him and played better the longer they practiced. After a couple of hours they returned to the school, where they ate lunch, during which Hermione made it quite clear that she thought they were irresponsible, then returned to the Quidditch pitch for the real training session. All their teammates but Angelina were already in the changing room when they entered.

“All right, Ron?” said George, winking at him.

“Yeah,” said Ron, who had become quieter and quieter all the way down to the pitch.

“Ready to show us all up, Ickle Prefect?” said Fred, emerging tousle-haired from the neck of his Quidditch robes, a slightly malicious grin on his face.

“Shut up,” said Ron, stony-faced, pulling on his own team robes for the first time. They fitted him well considering they had been Oliver Wood’s, who was rather broader in the shoulder.

“Okay everyone,” said Angelina, entering from the Captain’s office, already changed. “Let’s get to it, Alicia and Fred, if you can just bring the ball crate out for us. Oh, and there are a couple of people out there watching but I want you to just ignore them, all right?”

Something in her would-be casual voice made Harry think he might know who the uninvited spectators were, and sure enough, when they left the changing room for the bright sunlight of the pitch it was to a storm of catcalls and jeers from the Slytherin Quidditch

team and assorted hangers-on, who were grouped halfway up the empty stands and whose voices echoed loudly around the stadium.

“What’s that Weasley’s riding?” Malfoy called in his sneering drawl. “Why would anyone put a Flying Charm on a moldy old log like that?”

Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy Parkinson guffawed and shrieked with laughter. Ron mounted his broom and kicked off from the ground and Harry followed him, watching his ears turn red from behind.

“Ignore them,” he said, accelerating to catch up with Ron. “We’ll see who’s laughing after we play them . . .”

“Exactly the attitude I want, Harry,” said Angelina approvingly, soaring around them with the Quaffle under her arm and slowing to hover on the spot in front of her airborne team. “Okay everyone, we’re going to start with some passes just to warm up, the whole team please —”

“Hey, Johnson, what’s with that hairstyle anyway?” shrieked Pansy Parkinson from below. “Why would anyone want to look like they’ve got worms coming out of their head?”

Angelina swept her long braided hair out of her face and said calmly, “Spread out, then, and let’s see what we can do . . .”

Harry reversed away from the others to the far side of the pitch. Ron fell back toward the opposite goal. Angelina raised the Quaffle with one hand and threw it hard to Fred, who passed to George, who passed to Harry, who passed to Ron, who dropped it.

The Slytherins, led by Malfoy, roared and screamed with laughter. Ron, who had pelted toward the ground to catch the Quaffle before it landed, pulled out of the dive untidily, so that he slipped sideways on

his broom, and returned to playing height, blushing. Harry saw Fred and George exchange looks, but uncharacteristically neither of them said anything, for which he was grateful.

“Pass it on, Ron,” called Angelina, as though nothing had happened.

Ron threw the Quaffle to Alicia, who passed back to Harry, who passed to George. . . .

“Hey, Potter, how’s your scar feeling?” called Malfoy. “Sure you don’t need a lie-down? It must be, what, a whole week since you were in the hospital wing, that’s a record for you, isn’t it?”

Fred passed to Angelina; she reverse passed to Harry, who had not been expecting it, but caught it in the very tips of his fingers and passed it quickly to Ron, who lunged for it and missed by inches.

“Come on now, Ron,” said Angelina crossly, as Ron dived for the ground again, chasing the Quaffle. “Pay attention.”

It would have been hard to say whether Ron’s face or the Quaffle was a deeper scarlet when he returned again to playing height. Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherin team were howling with laughter.

On his third attempt, Ron caught the Quaffle; perhaps out of relief he passed it on so enthusiastically that it soared straight through Katie’s outstretched hands and hit her hard in the face.

“Sorry!” Ron groaned, zooming forward to see whether he had done any damage.

“Get back in position, she’s fine!” barked Angelina. “But as you’re passing to a teammate, do *try* not to knock her off her broom, won’t you? We’ve got Bludgers for that!”

Katie’s nose was bleeding. Down below the Slytherins were

stamping their feet and jeering. Fred and George converged on Katie.

“Here, take this,” Fred told her, handing her something small and purple from out of his pocket. “It’ll clear it up in no time.”

“All right,” called Angelina, “Fred, George, go and get your bats and a Bludger; Ron, get up to the goalposts, Harry, release the Snitch when I say so. We’re going to aim for Ron’s goal, obviously.”

Harry zoomed off after the twins to fetch the Snitch.

“Ron’s making a right pig’s ear of things, isn’t he?” muttered George, as the three of them landed at the crate containing the balls and opened it to extract one of the Bludgers and the Snitch.

“He’s just nervous,” said Harry. “He was fine when I was practicing with him this morning.”

“Yeah, well, I hope he hasn’t peaked too soon,” said Fred gloomily.

They returned to the air. When Angelina blew her whistle, Harry released the Snitch and Fred and George let fly the Bludger; from that moment on, Harry was barely aware of what the others were doing. It was his job to recapture the tiny fluttering golden ball that was worth a hundred and fifty points to the Seeker’s team and doing so required enormous speed and skill. He accelerated, rolling and swerving in and out of the Chasers, the warm autumn air whipping his face and the distant yells of the Slytherins so much meaningless roaring in his ears. . . . But too soon, the whistle brought him to a halt again.

“Stop — *stop* — STOP!” screamed Angelina. “Ron — you’re not covering your middle post!”

Harry looked around at Ron, who was hovering in front of the left-hand hoop, leaving the other two completely unprotected.

“Oh . . . sorry . . .”

“You keep shifting around while you’re watching the Chasers!” said Angelina. “Either stay in center position until you have to move to defend a hoop, or else circle the hoops, but don’t drift vaguely off to one side, that’s how you let in the last three goals!”

“Sorry . . .” Ron repeated, his red face shining like a beacon against the bright blue sky.

“And Katie, can’t you do something about that nosebleed?”

“It’s just getting worse!” said Katie thickly, attempting to stem the flow with her sleeve.

Harry glanced around at Fred, who was looking anxious and checking his pockets. He saw Fred pull out something purple, examine it for a second, and then look around at Katie, evidently horrorstruck.

“Well, let’s try again,” said Angelina. She was ignoring the Slytherins, who had now set up a chant of “*Gryffindor are losers, Gryffindor are losers,*” but there was a certain rigidity about her seat on the broom nevertheless.

This time they had been flying for barely three minutes when Angelina’s whistle sounded. Harry, who had just sighted the Snitch circling the opposite goalpost, pulled up feeling distinctly aggrieved.

“What now?” he said impatiently to Alicia, who was nearest.

“Katie,” she said shortly.

Harry turned and saw Angelina, Fred, and George all flying as fast as they could toward Katie. Harry and Alicia sped toward her too. It was plain that Angelina had stopped training just in time; Katie was now chalk-white and covered in blood.

“She needs the hospital wing,” said Angelina.

“We’ll take her,” said Fred. “She — er — might have swallowed a Blood Blisterpod by mistake —”

“Well, there’s no point continuing with no Beaters and a Chaser gone,” said Angelina glumly, as Fred and George zoomed off toward the castle supporting Katie between them. “Come on, let’s go and get changed.”

The Slytherins continued to chant as they trailed back into the changing rooms.

“How was practice?” asked Hermione rather coolly half an hour later, as Harry and Ron climbed through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room.

“It was —” Harry began.

“Completely lousy,” said Ron in a hollow voice, sinking into a chair beside Hermione. She looked up at Ron and her frostiness seemed to melt.

“Well, it was only your first one,” she said consolingly, “it’s bound to take time to —”

“Who said it was me who made it lousy?” snapped Ron.

“No one,” said Hermione, looking taken aback, “I thought —”

“You thought I was bound to be rubbish?”

“No, of course I didn’t! Look, you said it was lousy so I just —”

“I’m going to get started on some homework,” said Ron angrily and stomped off to the staircase to the boys’ dormitories and vanished from sight. Hermione turned to Harry.

“*Was* he lousy?”

“No,” said Harry loyally.

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“Well, I suppose he could’ve played better,” Harry muttered; “but it was only the first training session, like you said . . .”

Neither Harry nor Ron seemed to make much headway with their homework that night. Harry knew Ron was too preoccupied with how badly he had performed at Quidditch practice and he himself was having difficulty in getting the chant of “*Gryffindor are losers*” out of his head.

They spent the whole of Sunday in the common room, buried in their books while the room around them filled up, then emptied: It was another clear, fine day and most of their fellow Gryffindors spent the day out in the grounds, enjoying what might well be some of the last sunshine that year. By the evening Harry felt as though somebody had been beating his brain against the inside of his skull.

“You know, we probably should try and get more homework done during the week,” Harry muttered to Ron, as they finally laid aside Professor McGonagall’s long essay on the *Inanimatus Conjurus* spell and turned miserably to Professor Sinistra’s equally long and difficult essay about Jupiter’s moons.

“Yeah,” said Ron, rubbing slightly bloodshot eyes and throwing his fifth spoiled bit of parchment into the fire beside them. “Listen . . . shall we just ask Hermione if we can have a look at what she’s done?”

Harry glanced over at her; she was sitting with Crookshanks on her lap and chatting merrily to Ginny as a pair of knitting needles flashed in midair in front of her, now knitting a pair of shapeless elf socks.

“No,” he said heavily, “you know she won’t let us.”

And so they worked on while the sky outside the windows became steadily darker; slowly, the crowd in the common room began to thin again. At half-past eleven, Hermione wandered over to them, yawning.

“Nearly done?”

“No,” said Ron shortly.

“Jupiter’s biggest moon is Ganymede, not Callisto,” she said, pointing over Ron’s shoulder at a line in his Astronomy essay, “and it’s Io that’s got the volcanos.”

“Thanks,” snarled Ron, scratching out the offending sentences.

“Sorry, I only —”

“Yeah, well, if you’ve just come over here to criticize —”

“Ron —”

“I haven’t got time to listen to a sermon, all right, Hermione, I’m up to my neck in it here —”

“No — look!”

Hermione was pointing to the nearest window. Harry and Ron both looked over. A handsome screech owl was standing on the windowsill, gazing into the room at Ron.

“Isn’t that Hermes?” said Hermione, sounding amazed.

“Blimey, it is!” said Ron quietly, throwing down his quill and getting to his feet. “What’s Percy writing to me for?”

He crossed to the window and opened it; Hermes flew inside, landed upon Ron’s essay, and held out a leg to which a letter was attached. Ron took it off and the owl departed at once, leaving inky

footprints across Ron's drawing of the moon lo.

"That's definitely Percy's handwriting," said Ron, sinking back into his chair and staring at the words on the outside of the scroll: *To Ronald Weasley, Gryffindor House, Hogwarts*. He looked up at the other two. "What d'you reckon?"

"Open it!" said Hermione eagerly. Harry nodded.

Ron unrolled the scroll and began to read. The farther down the parchment his eyes traveled, the more pronounced became his scowl. When he had finished reading, he looked disgusted. He thrust the letter at Harry and Hermione, who leaned toward each other to read it together:

Dear Ron,

I have only just heard (from no less a person than the Minister of Magic himself, who has it from your new teacher, Professor Umbridge) that you have become a Hogwarts prefect.

I was most pleasantly surprised when I heard this news and must firstly offer my congratulations. I must admit that I have always been afraid that you would take what we might call the "Fred and George" route, rather than following in my footsteps, so you can imagine my feelings on hearing you have stopped flouting authority and have decided to shoulder some real responsibility.

But I want to give you more than congratulations, Ron, I want to give you some advice, which is why I am sending this at night rather than by the usual morning post. Hopefully you

will be able to read this away from prying eyes and avoid awkward questions.

From something the Minister let slip when telling me you are now a prefect, I gather that you are still seeing a lot of Harry Potter. I must tell you, Ron, that nothing could put you in danger of losing your badge more than continued fraternization with that boy. Yes, I am sure you are surprised to hear this — no doubt you will say that Potter has always been Dumbledore's favorite — but I feel bound to tell you that Dumbledore may not be in charge at Hogwarts much longer and the people who count have a very different — and probably more accurate — view of Potter's behavior. I shall say no more here, but if you look at the Daily Prophet tomorrow you will get a good idea of the way the wind is blowing — and see if you can spot yours truly!

Seriously, Ron, you do not want to be tarred with the same brush as Potter, it could be very damaging to your future prospects, and I am talking here about life after school too. As you must be aware, given that our father escorted him to court, Potter had a disciplinary hearing this summer in front of the whole Wizengamot and he did not come out of it looking too good. He got off on a mere technicality if you ask me and many of the people I've spoken to remain convinced of his guilt.

It may be that you are afraid to sever ties with Potter — I know that he can be unbalanced and, for all I know, violent — but if you have any worries about this, or have spotted

anything else in Potter's behavior that is troubling you, I urge you to speak to Dolores Umbridge, a really delightful woman, who I know will be only too happy to advise you.

This leads me to my other bit of advice. As I have hinted above, Dumbledore's regime at Hogwarts may soon be over. Your loyalty, Ron, should be not to him, but to the school and the Ministry. I am very sorry to hear that so far Professor Umbridge is encountering very little cooperation from staff as she strives to make those necessary changes within Hogwarts that the Ministry so ardently desires (although she should find this easier from next week — again, see the Prophet tomorrow!). I shall say only this — a student who shows himself willing to help Professor Umbridge now may be very well placed for Head Boyship in a couple of years!

I am sorry that I was unable to see more of you over the summer. It pains me to criticize our parents, but I am afraid I can no longer live under their roof while they remain mixed up with the dangerous crowd around Dumbledore (if you are writing to Mother at any point, you might tell her that a certain Sturgis Podmore, who is a great friend of Dumbledore's, has recently been sent to Azkaban for trespass at the Ministry. Perhaps that will open their eyes to the kind of petty criminals with whom they are currently rubbing shoulders). I count myself very lucky to have escaped the stigma of association with such people — the Minister really could not be more gracious to me — and I do hope, Ron, that you will not allow family ties to blind you to the misguided

nature of our parents' beliefs and actions either. I sincerely hope that, in time, they will realize how mistaken they were and I shall, of course, be ready to accept a full apology when that day comes.

Please think over what I have said most carefully, particularly the bit about Harry Potter, and congratulations again on becoming prefect.

Your brother,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Percy". The ink is dark and the signature is written on a light-colored background.

Harry looked up at Ron.

"Well," he said, trying to sound as though he found the whole thing a joke, "if you want to — er — what is it?" (He checked Percy's letter.) "Oh yeah — 'sever ties' with me, I swear I won't get violent."

"Give it back," said Ron, holding out his hand. "He is —" Ron said jerkily, tearing Percy's letter in half, "the world's" — he tore it into quarters — "biggest" — he tore it into eighths — "git." He threw the pieces into the fire.

"Come on, we've got to get this finished some time before dawn," he said briskly to Harry, pulling Professor Sinistra's essay back toward him.

Hermione was looking at Ron with an odd expression on her face.

"Oh, give them here," she said abruptly.

"What?" said Ron.

“Give them to me, I’ll look through them and correct them,” she said.

“Are you serious? Ah, Hermione, you’re a lifesaver,” said Ron, “what can I — ?”

“What you can say is, ‘We promise we’ll never leave our homework this late again,’” she said, holding out both hands for their essays, but she looked slightly amused all the same.

“Thanks a million, Hermione,” said Harry weakly, passing over his essay and sinking back into his armchair, rubbing his eyes.

It was now past midnight and the common room was deserted but for the three of them and Crookshanks. The only sound was that of Hermione’s quill scratching out sentences here and there on their essays and the ruffle of pages as she checked various facts in the reference books strewn across the table. Harry was exhausted. He also felt an odd, sick, empty feeling in his stomach that had nothing to do with tiredness and everything to do with the letter now curling blackly in the heart of the fire.

He knew that half the people inside Hogwarts thought him strange, even mad; he knew that the *Daily Prophet* had been making snide allusions to him for months, but there was something about seeing it written down like that in Percy’s writing, about knowing that Percy was advising Ron to drop him and even to tell tales on him to Umbridge, that made his situation real to him as nothing else had. He had known Percy for four years, had stayed in his house during the summers, shared a tent with him during the Quidditch World Cup, had even been awarded full marks by him in the second task of the Triwizard Tournament last year, yet now, Percy thought him

unbalanced and possibly violent.

And with a surge of sympathy for his godfather, Harry thought that Sirius was probably the only person he knew who could really understand how he felt at the moment, because Sirius was in the same situation; nearly everyone in the Wizarding world thought Sirius a dangerous murderer and a great Voldemort supporter and he had had to live with that knowledge for fourteen years . . .

Harry blinked. He had just seen something in the fire that could not have been there. It had flashed into sight and vanished immediately. No . . . it could not have been. . . . He had imagined it because he had been thinking about Sirius. . . .

“Okay, write that down,” Hermione said to Ron, pushing his essay and a sheet covered in her own writing back to Ron, “and then copy out this conclusion that I’ve written for you.”

“Hermione, you are honestly the most wonderful person I’ve ever met,” said Ron weakly, “and if I’m ever rude to you again —”

“— I’ll know you’re back to normal,” said Hermione. “Harry, yours is okay except for this bit at the end, I think you must have misheard Professor Sinistra, Europa’s covered in *ice*, not mice — Harry?”

Harry had slid off his chair onto his knees and was now crouching on the singed and threadbare hearthrug, gazing into the flames.

“Er — Harry?” said Ron uncertainly. “Why are you down there?”

“Because I’ve just seen Sirius’s head in the fire,” said Harry.

He spoke quite calmly; after all, he had seen Sirius’s head in this very fire the previous year and talked to it too. Nevertheless, he could not be sure that he had really seen it this time. . . . It had

vanished so quickly. . . .

“Sirius’s head?” Hermione repeated. “You mean like when he wanted to talk to you during the Triwizard Tournament? But he wouldn’t do that now, it would be too — *Sirius!*”

She gasped, gazing at the fire; Ron dropped his quill. There in the middle of the dancing flames sat Sirius’s head, long dark hair falling around his grinning face.

“I was starting to think you’d go to bed before everyone else had disappeared,” he said. “I’ve been checking every hour.”

“You’ve been popping into the fire every hour?” Harry said, half laughing.

“Just for a few seconds to check if the coast was clear yet.”

“But what if you’d been seen?” said Hermione anxiously.

“Well, I think a girl — first year by the look of her — might’ve got a glimpse of me earlier, but don’t worry,” Sirius said hastily, as Hermione clapped a hand to her mouth. “I was gone the moment she looked back at me and I’ll bet she just thought I was an oddly shaped log or something.”

“But Sirius, this is taking an awful risk —” Hermione began.

“You sound like Molly,” said Sirius. “This was the only way I could come up with of answering Harry’s letter without resorting to a code — and codes are breakable.”

At the mention of Harry’s letter, Hermione and Ron had both turned to stare at him.

“You didn’t say you’d written to Sirius!” said Hermione accusingly.

“I forgot,” said Harry, which was perfectly true; his meeting with

Cho in the Owlery had driven everything before it out of his mind. “Don’t look at me like that, Hermione, there was no way anyone would have got secret information out of it, was there, Sirius?”

“No, it was very good,” said Sirius, smiling. “Anyway, we’d better be quick, just in case we’re disturbed — your scar.”

“What about — ?” Ron began, but Hermione said quickly, “We’ll tell you afterward, go on, Sirius.”

“Well, I know it can’t be fun when it hurts, but we don’t think it’s anything to really worry about. It kept aching all last year, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, and Dumbledore said it happened whenever Voldemort was feeling a powerful emotion,” said Harry, ignoring, as usual, Ron and Hermione’s winces. “So maybe he was just, I dunno, really angry or something the night I had that detention.”

“Well, now he’s back it’s bound to hurt more often,” said Sirius.

“So you don’t think it had anything to do with Umbridge touching me when I was in detention with her?” Harry asked.

“I doubt it,” said Sirius. “I know her by reputation and I’m sure she’s no Death Eater —”

“She’s foul enough to be one,” said Harry darkly and Ron and Hermione nodded vigorously in agreement.

“Yes, but the world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters,” said Sirius with a wry smile. “I know she’s a nasty piece of work, though — you should hear Remus talk about her.”

“Does Lupin know her?” asked Harry quickly, remembering Umbridge’s comments about dangerous half-breeds during her first lesson.

“No,” said Sirius, “but she drafted a bit of anti-werewolf

legislation two years ago that makes it almost impossible for him to get a job.”

Harry remembered how much shabbier Lupin looked these days and his dislike of Umbridge deepened even further.

“What’s she got against werewolves?” said Hermione angrily.

“Scared of them, I expect,” said Sirius, smiling at her indignation. “Apparently she loathes part-humans; she campaigned to have merpeople rounded up and tagged last year too. Imagine wasting your time and energy persecuting merpeople when there are little toerags like Kreacher on the loose —”

Ron laughed but Hermione looked upset.

“Sirius!” she said reproachfully. “Honestly, if you made a bit of an effort with Kreacher I’m sure he’d respond, after all, you are the only member of his family he’s got left, and Professor Dumbledore said —”

“So what are Umbridge’s lessons like?” Sirius interrupted. “Is she training you all to kill half-breeds?”

“No,” said Harry, ignoring Hermione’s affronted look at being cut off in her defense of Kreacher. “She’s not letting us use magic at all!”

“All we do is read the stupid textbook,” said Ron.

“Ah, well, that figures,” said Sirius. “Our information from inside the Ministry is that Fudge doesn’t want you trained in combat.”

“*Trained in combat?*” repeated Harry incredulously. “What does he think we’re doing here, forming some sort of wizard army?”

“That’s exactly what he thinks you’re doing,” said Sirius, “or rather, that’s exactly what he’s afraid Dumbledore’s doing — forming his own private army, with which he will be able to take on the

Ministry of Magic.”

There was a pause at this, then Ron said, “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard, including all the stuff that Luna Lovegood comes out with.”

“So we’re being prevented from learning Defense Against the Dark Arts because Fudge is scared we’ll use spells against the Ministry?” said Hermione, looking furious.

“Yep,” said Sirius. “Fudge thinks Dumbledore will stop at nothing to seize power. He’s getting more paranoid about Dumbledore by the day. It’s a matter of time before he has Dumbledore arrested on some trumped-up charge.”

This reminded Harry of Percy’s letter.

“D’you know if there’s going to be anything about Dumbledore in the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow? Only Ron’s brother Percy reckons there will be —”

“I don’t know,” said Sirius, “I haven’t seen anyone from the Order all weekend; they’re all busy. It’s just been Kreacher and me here . . .”

There was a definite note of bitterness in Sirius’s voice.

“So you haven’t had any news about Hagrid, either?”

“Ah . . .” said Sirius, “well, he was supposed to be back by now, no one’s sure what’s happened to him.” Then, seeing their stricken faces, he added quickly, “But Dumbledore’s not worried, so don’t you three get yourselves in a state; I’m sure Hagrid’s fine.”

“But if he was supposed to be back by now . . .” said Hermione in a small, worried voice.

“Madame Maxime was with him, we’ve been in touch with her

and she says they got separated on the journey home — but there's nothing to suggest he's hurt or — well, nothing to suggest he's not perfectly okay.”

Unconvinced, Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged worried looks.

“Listen, don't go asking too many questions about Hagrid,” said Sirius hastily, “it'll just draw even more attention to the fact that he's not back, and I know Dumbledore doesn't want that. Hagrid's tough, he'll be okay.” And when they did not appear cheered by this, Sirius added, “When's your next Hogsmeade weekend anyway? I was thinking, we got away with the dog disguise at the station, didn't we? I thought I could —”

“NO!” said Harry and Hermione together, very loudly.

“Sirius, didn't you see the *Daily Prophet*?” said Hermione anxiously.

“Oh that,” said Sirius, grinning, “they're always guessing where I am, they haven't really got a clue —”

“Yeah, but we think this time they have,” said Harry. “Something Malfoy said on the train made us think he knew it was you, and his father was on the platform, Sirius — you know, Lucius Malfoy — so don't come up here, whatever you do, if Malfoy recognizes you again —”

“All right, all right, I've got the point,” said Sirius. He looked most displeased. “Just an idea, thought you might like to get together —”

“I would, I just don't want you chucked back in Azkaban!” said Harry.

There was a pause in which Sirius looked out of the fire at Harry, a crease between his sunken eyes.

“You’re less like your father than I thought,” he said finally, a definite coolness in his voice. “The risk would’ve been what made it fun for James.”

“Look —”

“Well, I’d better get going. I can hear Kreacher coming down the stairs,” said Sirius, but Harry was sure he was lying. “I’ll write to tell you a time I can make it back into the fire, then, shall I? If you can stand to risk it?”

There was a tiny *pop*, and the place where Sirius’s head had been was flickering flame once more.

Percy en Kussingvoet

Die volgende oggend word Harry eerste van almal in sy slaapsaal wakker. Hy lê 'n rukkie en kyk hoe die stof in die sonstraal warrel wat deur die skreef in sy hemelbed se gordyne val. Dis lekker dat dit Saterdag is. Dit het gevoel of die eerste week van die kwartaal vir altyd gaan aanhou, nes 'n uiters lang Geskiedenis van die Tower-kuns-lës.

Te oordeel na die slaperige stilte en die vars voorkoms van daardie sonstraal moet dit net ná dagbreek wees. Hy trek die gordyne om sy bed oop, staan op en begin aantrek. Al geluid, behalwe die gekwetter van voëls in die verte, is die stadige diep asemhaling van sy mede-Griffindors. Hy maak sy skoolsak saggies oop, haal 'n vel perkament en sy veerpen uit en stap na die geselskamer.

Hy gaan reguit na sy geliefde sagte leunstoel langs die kaggel wat nou koud is, maak hom gemaklik en rol sy perkament oop. Hy kyk in die vertrek rond. Die opgefrommelde stukke perkament, Spoegklippe, leë wetenskapflesse en lekkergoedpapiere wat gewoonlik aan die einde van die dag oor die geselskamer se vloer gesaai lê, is weg en so ook al Hermien se elfhoede. Hy wonder vlugtig hoeveel elwe nou al vry is, of hulle wil wees of nie. Hy maak sy inkbottel oop, doop sy veerpen daarin en hou dit effens bo die gladde geel perkamentoppervlak terwyl hy hard dink . . . maar 'n minuut of wat later staar hy na die leë kaggel. Hy weet glad nie wat om te sê nie.

Nou verstaan hy hoe moeilik dit vir Ron en Hermien was toe hulle tydens die vakansie vir hom moes skryf. Hoe kan hy vir Sirius skryf wat die afgelope week gebeur het en alles vra wat hy wil weet sonder dat 'n moontlike briefonderskepper 'n klomp vertroulike inligting kry?

'n Rukkie lank staar hy roerloos in die kaggel. Toe neem hy 'n besluit, doop sy veerpen weer in die ink en begin skryf.

Liewe Snuffels,

Ek hoop jy's oukei. Die eerste week was aaklig, ek is baie bly dis naweek.

Ons het 'n nuwe onderwyser vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste, professor Umbridge. Sy's amper so gaaf soos jou ma. Ek skryf omdat dit waaroor ek in die vakansie vir jou geskryf het weer laas nag gebeur het toe ek detensie by Umbridge moes doen.

Ons mis ons grootste vriend baie en hoop hy kom gou weer terug.
Skryf asseblief gou.

Beste wense,

Harry

Harry lees die brief 'n paar keer en probeer hom voorstel wat 'n buitestander daarvan sal dink. Hy glo nie iemand sal kan raai wat hy bedoel – of met wie hy praat – net deur sy brief te lees nie. Hy hoop Sirius vang die skimp oor Hagrid en laat weet vir hulle wanneer Hagrid gaan terugkom. Harry wil nie reguit vra nie, want dit kan te veel aandag vestig op wat Hagrid ook al doen.

Dis 'n kort brief, maar dit het lank gevat om te skryf. Die son het al halfpad oor die vertrek geskuif terwyl hy daaraan gewerk het en hy hoor dofweg hoe mense bo hom in die slaapsale beweeg. Hy verseël die perkament noukeurig, klim deur die portretopening en stap Uilhuis toe.

“Ek sal nie daarlangs stap as ek jy is nie,” sê Nick-amper-sonderkop, wat verbouereerd net voor Harry toe hy met die gang af loop deur die muur gedryf het. “Nurks beplan 'n amusante poets vir die volgende persoon wat in die gang verby Paracelsus se borsbeeld stap.”

“Soos dat Paracelsus op daardie een se kop gaan val?”

“Snaaks genoeg, ja,” sê Nick-amper-sonderkop in 'n verveelde stem. “Subtiliteit was nog nooit Nurks se sterk punt nie. Ek gaan die Bloedige Baron gou soek, hy kan hom dalk keer . . . Sien jou, Harry . . .”

“Ja, tot siens,” sê Harry en draai nie regs nie, maar links en neem 'n langer maar veiliger roete na die Uilhuis. Hy stap verby venster ná venster waardeur hy skitterblou lug kan sien en dit laat hom sommer beter voel. Later vandag het hulle 'n Kwiddiekoefening. Hy gaan uiteindelik terug op die Kwiddiekveld wees.

Iets skuur teen sy enkels. Hy kyk af en sien die opsigter se brandmaer grys kat, mevrou Norris, verbysluip. Sy kyk hom 'n oomblik aan met haar groot geel oë en verdwyn dan agter Wilfred die Wyse se standbeeld.

“Ek doen niks verkeerd nie, oukei!” skree Harry agterna. Sy lyk soos 'n kat wat by haar baas gaan stories aandra, maar Harry kan nie verstaan hoekom nie, hy het die volste reg om op 'n Saterdagoggend na die Uilhuis te gaan.

Die son sit reeds hoog en toe Harry die Uilhuis binnegaan, verblind die lig deur die glaslose vensters sy oë. Breë silwer sonstrale val kruis en dwars deur die ronde kamer waarin honderde uile op balke sit. Hulle lyk 'n bietjie rusteloos in die vroegoggendlig. Party het duidelik gaan jag en pas eers teruggekom. Beentjies op die strooibedekte vloer kraak onder Harry se skoene. Hy kyk op om vir Hedwig te soek.

“A, daar's jy,” sê hy toe hy haar amper heel bo teen die koepelvormige dak sien sit. “Kom hier, ek het 'n brief vir jou.”

Hedwig strek haar vlerke en sweef met 'n hees hoe-hoe af na sy skouer.

“Hoor hier, ek weet hier staan Snuffels voorop,” fluister hy sonder om te weet hoekom, “maar dis vir Sirius, oukei?”

Sy knip haar ambergeel oë een keer en hy weet sy verstaan.

“Mooi vlieg,” sê Harry en dra haar na een van die vensters. Haar greep op sy arm verstewig effens net voor sy opstyg en in die helder lug verdwyn. Hy kyk haar agterna tot sy net 'n klein swart vlekke is. Dan kyk hy na Hagrid se hut wat hy van hier af duidelik kan sien, maar dis duidelik nog onbewoon. Geen rokie trek uit die skoorsteen nie en die gordyne is toegetrek.

Die Verbode Would se boomtoppe swaai effens in 'n ligte windjie. Die lug is vars teen Harry se gesig en hy dink aan Kwiddiek later vandag – dan sien hy dit. 'n Tamaai reptielagtige gevleuelde perd, soos dié wat die Hogwarts-koetse trek, styg met leeragtige swart vlerke wyd oopgesprei uit die bome op soos 'n gedrogtelike pterodaktiel. Dit vlieg in 'n wye sirkel en duik weer terug tussen die bome. Die hele ding het so vinnig gebeur dat as Harry se hart nie so woens geklop het nie, hy dit nie sou geglo het nie.

Agter hom gaan die Uilhuis se deur oop. Hy spring verskrik agteruit en draai vinnig om. Dis Cho Chang met 'n brief en 'n pakkie in haar hande.

“Hallo,” sê Harry outomaties.

“O... hallo,” sê sy uitasem. “Ek het nie gedink hier sal so vroeg al iemand wees nie... Ek het vyf minute gelede onthou dat my ma vandag verjaar.”

Sy wys die pakkie vir hom.

“O,” sê Harry. Dis of sy brein vasgehaak het. Hy wil iets sê wat interessant of grappig is, maar die gedrogtelike gevleuelde perd is nog vars in sy geheue.

“Lekker dag,” sê hy en wys na die venster. Sy ingewande trek krampagtig saam. Die weer. Hy praat oor die weer.

“Ja.” Cho kyk rond op soek na 'n geskikte uil. “Lekker vir Kwiddiek. Ek was die hele week nie een keer uit nie, en jy?”

"Nee," sê Harry.

Cho kies een van die skooluile. Sy lok hom af na haar arm en hy hou sy poot gedwee uit sodat sy die pakkie kan vasmaak.

"Het Griffindor al 'n nuwe Wagter?" vra sy.

"Ja," sê Harry. "Dis my vriend, Ron Weasley."

"Die Tornado-hater," sê Cho koel. "Beteken hy iets?"

"Ja. Altans, ek dink so. Ek het nie sy proewe gesien nie, ek het detensie gehad."

Cho kyk op van waar sy nog besig is om die pakkie aan die uil te been vas te maak.

"Daardie Umbridge-vroumens is mislik," sê sy laag. "Om vir jou detensie te gee net omdat jy die waarheid gepraat het oor hoe – hoe – hoe hy dood is. Almal praat daaroor, dit lê die hele skool vol. Jy was baie dapper om so jou man teen haar te staan."

Harry se ingewande blaas so vinnig op, dit voel of hy 'n entjie bo die misbestrooide vloer sweef. Wat maak 'n simpel vlieende perd tog saak? Cho dink hy was baie dapper. Vir 'n oomblik oorweeg hy dit om haar te help met die pakkie sodat sy die littekens op sy hand toevallig aspris kan sien – maar op daardie oomblik gaan die Uilhuis se deur weer oop.

Fillis die opsigter kom hygend binne. Daar is pers kolle op sy maer, beaarde wange, sy keelvelle tril en sy dun grys haartjies is deurmekaar. Dis duidelik dat hy hierheen gehardloop het. Mevrouw Norris volg op sy hakke en miaau hongerig terwyl sy na die uile bo haar staar. Daar is 'n rustelose gefladder van vlerke en 'n groot bruin uil klap sy snawel dreigend.

"Aha!" Fillis gee 'n tree nader aan Harry terwyl sy hangwange bewe van woede. "Ek het 'n wenk gekry dat jy beplan om 'n reuse-bestelling Misbomme te plaas!"

Harry vou sy arms en staar na die opsigter.

"Wie't vir jou gesê ek wil Misbomme bestel?"

Cho kyk fronsend van Harry na Fillis. Die nonnetjiesuil op haar arm, moeg van op een been staan, hoe-hoe vermanend, maar sy ignoreer hom.

"Ek het my bronne," sê Fillis op 'n selftevrede manier. "Gee dit wat jy wil stuur hier."

Harry is bitter dankbaar dat hy sy brief dadelik gestuur het. "Ek kan nie. Dis reeds weg."

"Weg?" sê Fillis, sy gesig vertrek van woede.

"Weg," sê Harry.

Fillis se mond gaan woedend oop, maar daar kom nie 'n geluid uit nie. Sy oë speel oor Harry se kleed.

"Hoe weet ek dis nie in jou sak nie?"

"Omdat –"

"Ek het gesien toe hy dit stuur," sê Cho vererg.

Fillis draai na haar.

"Jy't gesien –?"

"Dis reg, ek het gesien," sê sy heftig.

Dis 'n rukkie stil terwyl Fillis na Cho gluur en sy op haar beurt na hom gluur. Toe draai die opsigter op sy hakke om en skuifel weg. By die deur gaan hy staan met sy hand op die deurknop en kyk na Harry.

"Laat ek net 'n sweempie van 'n Misbom kry . . ."

Hy strompel met die trappe af. Mevrouw Norris staar vir oulaas verlangend na die uile voor sy hom volg.

Harry en Cho kyk na mekaar.

"Dankie," sê Harry.

"Dis niks," sê Cho, haar gesig effens pienk. Sy maak die pakkie klaar vas aan die uil se been. "Jy het nie Misbomme bestel nie, het jy?"

"Nee," sê Harry.

"Ek wonder hoekom dink hy jy het," sê sy terwyl sy die uil na die venster dra.

Harry haal sy skouers op. Hy weet net so min as sy, hoewel dit hom op hierdie oomblik glad nie pla nie.

Hulle stap saam uit die Uilhuis. By die ingang van 'n gang wat na die kasteel se westelike vleuel lei, sê Cho: "Ek gaan hierdie kant toe. Wel . . . sien jou, Harry."

"Ja . . . sien jou."

Sy glimlag en loop weg. Harry stap aan. Hy is hoogs in sy skik. Hy het dit reggekry om 'n ordentlike gesprek met haar te voer en nie een keer soos 'n gek te lyk nie. . . . *Jy was baie dapper om so jou man teen haar te staan . . .* Cho dink hy's dapper . . . sy haat hom nie omdat hy lewe nie.

Natuurlik het sy vir Cedric verkies, hy weet dit tog. . . . Hoewel dinge anders kon gewees het as hy haar voor Cedric vir die Bal gevra het, sy het regtig jammer geklink toe sy nee moes sê.

"Môre," sê Harry vrolik vir Ron en Hermien en gaan sit langs hulle by die Griffindor-tafel in die Groot Saal.

"Hoekom lyk jy so in jou noppies?" vra Ron verbaas.

"Hm . . . Kwiddiek later vandag," sê Harry opgewek en trek 'n groot skottel vol spek en eiers nader.

"O . . . ja" Ron sit die sny roosterbrood neer en vat 'n groot sluk pampoensap. "Hoor hier . . . jy wil nie dalk 'n bietjie vroeër saam met my uitgaan nie? Net om te – hm – dat ek 'n bietjie voor die tyd kan oefen. Om my oog in te kry."

"Ja, oukei," sê Harry.

"Ek dink nie dis 'n goeie idee nie," sê Hermien vermanend. "Julle is al twee ver agter met julle huiswerk en –"

Sy bly stil. Die oggendpos het gekom en 'n tamaai steenuil kom aangesail met die *Daaglikse Profeet* in sy snawel. Hy land gevaarlik naby die suikerpot en hou sy poot uit. Hermien steek 'n Knoet in sy leersakkie, neem die koerant en kyk krities na die voorblad terwyl die uil wegvlieg.

"Enigiets interessants?" vra Ron. Harry grinnik. Hy weet Ron probeer haar aandag van hulle huiswerk aflei.

"Nee," sug sy, "net 'n spul twak oor die basvioolspeler van die Skikgodinne wat gaan trou."

Hermien vou die koerant oop en verdwyn agter die bladsye. Harry skep vir hom nog 'n porsie spek en eiers in. Ron staar afgetrokke na die Saal se hoë vensters.

"Wag 'n bietjie," sê Hermien skielik. "O nee . . . Sirius!"

"Wat gaan aan?" Harry gryp so wild na die koerant dat dit middel-deur skeur en hy en Hermien elkeen 'n helfte vashou.

"*Die Ministerie vir Towerkuns het 'n wenk uit 'n betroubare bron ontvang dat Sirius Swardt, berugte massamoordenaar . . . bla-bla-bla tans in Londen skuil!*" lees Hermien in 'n benoude fluisterstem.

"Ek wed dis Lucius Malfoy," sê Harry skor. "Hy't vir Sirius by die stasie herken . . ."

"Wat?" sê Ron geskok. "Wil jy sê –"

"Sjii!" sê die ander twee.

"*Die Ministerie waarsku die towergemeenskap dat Swardt baie gevaarlik is . . . dertien mense vermoor . . . uit Azkaban ontsnap . . .* die gewone bog." Hermien sit haar helfte van die koerant neer en kyk benoud na Harry en Ron. "Wel, hy moet net nie weer sy voete uit die huis sit nie, dis al," fluister sy. "Dompeldorius het hom ge-waarsku om binne te bly."

Harry staar grimmig na die stuk van die *Profeet* wat hy afgeskeur het. 'n Advertensie van 'n uitverkoop by Madame Malkin se Mantels vir alle Geleenthede beslaan die grootste deel van die bladsy.

"Haai!" sê hy en druk die koerant plat sodat Hermien en Ron kan sien. "Kyk hier!"

"Ek het oorgenoeg mantels," keer Ron.

"Nee," sê Harry. "Kyk, hierdie stukkie hier . . ."

Ron en Hermien leun nader om dit te lees. Die item is net 'n paar sentimeter lank en is heel onderaan die kolom. Die opskrif lui:

Sturgis Podmore, 38, van Laburnumhof nommer 2, Clapham het voor die Townenaarshoërhof verskyn op aanklag van inbraak en poging tot roof by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns, op 31 Augustus. Podmore is gearresteer deur Eric Munch, wagtowenaar by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns, toe hy die oggend om eenuur probeer het om 'n topsekerheidsdeur oop te dwing. Podmore, wat geweier het om getuienis te lewer, is op albei klagte tot ses maande in Azkaban gevonnis.

"Sturgis Podmore?" sê Ron stadig. "Hy's mos daai ou wie se kop soos 'n grasdak lyk? Hy behoort aan die Ord—"

"Ron, sjjj!" Hermien kyk verskrik rond.

"Ses maande in Azkaban!" fluister Harry geskok. "Net omdat hy 'n deur wou oopmaak!"

"Moenie simpel wees nie, dis nie net omdat hy 'n deur wou oopmaak nie. Wat op aarde het hy daardie tyd van die nag by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns gesoek?" sis Hermien.

"Dink jy hy was daar vir die Orde?" prewel Ron.

"Wag 'n bietjie . . ." sê Harry stadig. "Sturgis moes ons kom afsien het, onthou julle?"

Die ander twee kyk na hom.

"Hy was deel van ons wag King's Cross toe, onthou? En Moodie was kwaad omdat hy nie opgedaag het nie. Hy was dus nie tóe met 'n opdrag besig nie."

"Wel, dalk het hulle nie gedink hy sal gevang word nie," sê Hermien.

"Dalk is dit 'n soort sameswering!" sê Ron opgewonde. "Nee – luister!" Sy stem sak dramaties toe Hermien kwaai na hom kyk. "Wat as die Ministerie vermoed het hy is een van Dompeldorius se manne en toe – laa'k sien – toe lok hulle hom na die Ministerie – en hy't glad nie eens probeer om by 'n deur in te breek nie! Dalk het hulle net iets opgemaak om hom te kan vang!"

Daar heers 'n stilte terwyl Harry en Hermien hieroor dink. Harry dink dis ietwat vergesog, maar Hermien lyk nogal beïndruk.

"Weet jy, ek sal nie verbaas wees as dit waar is nie."

Sy vou haar helfte van die koerant ingedagte op. Toe Harry sy mes en vurk neersit, is dit of sy uit 'n droom wakker word.

"Oukei, wel, ek dink ons moet daardie opstel vir Spruit oor die selfbemestingstruik eerste takel, en as ons gelukkig is, kan ons voor middagete met McGonagall se Inanimatus Towerspreuk begin . . ."

Harry voel effens skuldig toe hy dink aan die stapel huiswerk wat

ho op hom wag, maar die lug is 'n heerlike helderblou en hy was 'n week laas op sy Vuurslag.

"Ek meen, ons kan dit altyd vannag doen," sê Ron toe hy en Harry met hul besems oor hul skouers met die helling afstap na die Kwiddiekveld. Hermien se waarskuwings oor die naderende Uile tuit nog in hul ore. "En wat's verkeerd met môre? Sy stres te veel oor werk, dis haar probleem." Hy bly 'n rukkie stil en sê dan effens benoud: "Dink jy sy was ernstig toe sy gesê het ons gaan nie weer by haar afskryf nie?"

"Hm, ek dink so," sê Harry. "Maar dit is ook belangrik. Ons moet oefen as ons in die Kwiddiekspan wil bly."

"Ja, dis waar," sê Ron 'n bietjie vroliker. "En daar's tonne tyd om al ons huiswerk te doen."

Toe hulle by die Kwiddiekveld kom, kyk Harry na regs waar die Verbode Woud se boomtoppe donker swaai. Niks vlieg daaruit nie. Die hemel is skoon, behalwe 'n paar uile wat om die Uilhuis se tooring fladder. Hy besluit om nie meer aan die vlieënde perd te dink nie. Dit het mos niks aan hom gedoen nie, en hy stoot dit uit sy gedagtes.

Hulle gaan haal balle uit die kas in die kleedkamer en begin. Ron hou by die drie hoë doelpale wag en Harry speel Jaer en probeer om die Swelger verby Ron te kry. Harry dink Ron is nogal goed. Hy keer omtrent 'n driekwart van Harry se doele weg en speel al beter hoe langer hulle oefen. Ná 'n paar uur gaan hulle terug kasteel toe vir middagete. Hermien maak dit duidelik dat sy dink hulle is uiters onverantwoordelik.

Hulle gaan terug na die Kwiddiekveld vir die regte oefensessie. Al hul spanmaats behalwe Angelina is reeds in die kleedkamer toe hulle instap.

"Alles reg, Ron?" vra George en knipoog vir hom.

"Ja," sê Ron, wat al stiller geword het op pad na die veld.

"Gereed om ons almal uit te stof, klein prefekkie?" sê Fred en steek sy kop deur sy Kwiddiekkleed, 'n effense moedswillige grinnik op sy gesig.

"Bly stil," sê Ron gevoelloos. Hy trek sy eie spankleed vir die eerste keer aan. Dit sit goed, al het Oliver Wood breër skouers gehad.

"Oukei, julle almal," sê Angelina toe sy klaar aangetrek uit die kaptein se kantoor kom. "Kom ons gaan. Alicia en Fred, sal julle die balkrat vir ons bring? O, en daar's 'n paar mense daar buite wat kom kyk het. Ek wil hê julle moet maak of hulle nie daar is nie, oukei?"

Iets aan haar oordrewe argelose manier laat Harry dink hy weet

wie die onverwagte toeskouers is, en sowaar, toe hulle uit die kleedkamer in die helder sonlig veld toe stap, hoor hulle die gejou en gefluit van die Slibberin-kwiddiekspan en hul aanhangers. Hulle sit in die middel van die pawiljoen sodat hul stemme deur die stadion weergalm.

“Waarop ry daardie Weasley?” skree Malfoy in sy honende draalstem. “Hoekom sal iemand ’n vliegtowerspreuk oor so ’n muwwe ou stok wil uitspreek?”

Krabbe, Goliat en Pansy Parkinson gil van die lag. Ron klim op sy besem en skop weg en Harry, wat hom volg, sien hoe die agterkant van sy ore rooi word.

“Ignoreer hulle,” sê hy en skiet vorentoe om Ron in te haal. “Ons sal sien wie lag as hulle eers teen ons gespeel het . . .”

“Dis die houding wat ek soek, Potter,” sê Angelina goedkeurend toe sy met die Swelger onder haar arm om hulle swiep en spoed verminder om voor haar span in die lug te hang. “Oukei, julle almal, ons begin met ’n paar aangee om op te warm. Die hele span, asseblief . . .”

“Hei, Johnson, watse soort haarstyl is dit dan?” skree Pansy Parkinson van onder af. “Hoekom sal iemand wil lyk of daar wurms uit haar kop groei?”

Angelina vee haar vlegseltjies uit haar gesig en gaan bedaad voort: “Sprei uit, dan kyk ons wat ons kan doen.”

Harry vlieg na die oorkant van die veld. Ron val terug na die doelpale aan die ander kant. Angelina lig die Swelger met een hand en gooi dit hard na Fred, wat vir George aangee, wat vir Harry aangee, wat vir Ron aangee, wat dit laat val.

Die Slibberins, aangespoor deur Malfoy, skree en brul van die lag. Ron, wat afgeduik het om die Swelger te vang voor dit kan grondvat, maak so ’n slordige draai dat hy skuins oor sy besem hang. Sy gesig is rooi toe hy na speelhoogte terugvlieg. Harry sien hoe Fred en George na mekaar kyk, maar hulle bly vreemd genoeg stil.

“Gee dit uit, Ron!” skree Angelina asof niks gebeur het nie.

Ron gooi die Swelger na Alicia, wat dit vir Harry aangee, wat vir George aangee . . .

“Haai, Potter, hoe voel jou litteken?” skree Malfoy. “Is jy seker jy wil nie ’n bietjie gaan lê nie? Dit moet ’n week wees sedert jy laas in die siekeboeg was, dis ’n rekord vir jou, hè?”

George gooi na Angelina. Sy maak ’n terugaangee na Harry, wat dit nie verwag het nie, maar die Swelger op sy vingerpunte vang en vinnig aangee na Ron, wat vorentoe skiet en dit net-net mis vang.

"Komaan, Ron," sê Angelina kwaai toe hy weer agter die Swelger aan grond toe duik. "Konsentreer."

Dis moeilik om te sê wat die rooiste is toe Ron weer, op speelhoopie is: sy gesig of die Swelger. Malfoy en die res van die Slibberins lê soos hulle lag.

Ron vang die Swelger met sy derde poging, maar gee dit uit pure verligting só oorhaastig uit dat dit deur Katie se uitgestrekte vingers tref en haar hard in die gesig tref.

"Jammer!" steun Ron en skiet vorentoe om te kyk watter skade hy gedoen het.

"Gaan terug na jou plek, sy's oukei!" blaf Angelina. "Maar probeer om nie jou spanmaats van hulle besems af te gooi as jy aangee nie. Dis die Moker se werk!"

Katie se neus bloei. Die Slibberins stamp hulle voete en skree. Fred en George drom om Katie saam.

"Hier," sê Fred en haal 'n klein pers iets uit sy sak, "dit sal dit jammer gou laat ophou."

"Reg," roep Angelina. "Fred, George, kry julle kolwe en 'n Moker. Ron, op na die doelpale. Harry, laat los die Snip wanneer ek so sê. Ons mik natuurlik vir Ron se pale."

Harry zoem agter die tweeling aan om die Snip te gaan haal.

"Ron is besig om alles lekker op te mors," brom George toe die driestuks by die balkrat grondvat en dit oopmaak om 'n Moker en die Snip uit te haal.

"Hy's op sy senuwees," sê Harry. "Hy was oukei toe ons vanoggend geoefen het."

"Ja, wel, ek hoop nie sy beste is klaar verby nie," sê Fred suur.

Hulle vlieg boontoe. Toe Angelina haar fluitjie blaas, laat Harry die Snip gaan en Fred en George laat los die Moker. Van daardie oomblik weet Harry skaars wat die ander mense doen. Dis sy werk om die klein, fladderende goue balletjie wat 'n honderd-en-vyftig punte vir die Soeker se span werd is, te vang en daarvoor moet jy ongelooflike spoed en vaardigheid hê. Hy versnel, rol en swenk in en uit tussen die Jaers, die warm herfslug waai in sy gesig en die verafkrete van die Slibberins word 'n betekenislose gebrul. maar te gou bring die fluitjie hulle tot stilstand.

"Stop – stop – STOP!" skree Angelina. "Ron, jy dek nie jou middelste paal nie!"

Harry kyk om na Ron, wat voor die linkerkantste hoepel hang en die ander twee heeltemal onbewaak laat.

"O . . . jammer . . ."

"Jy hou aan beweeg en kyk na die Jaers!" sê Angelina. "Bly of in

die middelposisie tot jy moet beweeg om 'n hoepel te beskerm of sirkel om die hoepels, maar moenie eenkant toe dryf nie, dis hoe jy die laaste drie doele gemis het!"

"Jammer..." herhaal Ron en sy rooi gesig gloei soos 'n sinjaal teen die helderblou lug.

"En Katie, kan jy nie iets aan jou neus doen nie?"

"Dit bloei net al erger!" sê Katie gesmoord terwyl sy die bloeding met haar mou probeer keer.

Harry kyk om na Fred, wat benoud lyk en in sy sakke grawe. Hy sien hoe Fred iets pers uithaal, daarna loer en toe duidelik benoud na Katie kyk.

"Wel, kom ons probeer weer," sê Angelina. Sy ignoreer die Slibberins wat nou "*Griffindor gaan pak kry, Griffindor gaan pak kry*," skree, maar daar is 'n sekere stokkerigheid aan die manier waarop sy op haar besem sit.

Hierdie keer vlieg hulle skaars drie minute voor Angelina haar fluitjie blaas. Harry, wat die Snip so pas by die doelpaal aan die oorkant sien draai het, kom ergerlik tot stilstand.

"Wat nou weer?" vra hy ongeduldig vir Alicia wat die naaste aan hom is.

"Katie," sê sy kortaf.

Harry kyk om en sien hoe Angelina, Fred en George vinnig na Katie vlieg. Harry en Alicia vlieg ook nader. Dis duidelik dat Angelina die oefening net betyds gestop het. Katie se gesig is spierwit en haar kleed vol bloed.

"Sy moet siekeboeg toe gaan," sê Angelina.

"Ons sal haar neem," sê Fred. "Sy – hm – sy het dalk per ongeluk 'n Bloedblaaspeul geneem –"

"Wel, dis sinneloos om voort te gaan sonder Brekers en met 'n Jaer wat buite aksie is," sê Angelina vererg toe Fred en George met Katie tussen hulle na die kasteel vlieg. "Kom ons gaan trek uit."

Die Slibberins hou aan om te dreun-sing toe hulle kleedkamers toe stap.

"Hoe was die oefening?" vra Hermien koel toe Harry en Ron 'n halfuur later deur die portretopening in die Griffindor-geselskamer klim.

"Dit was –" begin Harry.

"Absoluut aaklig," sê Ron in 'n hol stem. Hy val in die stoel langs Hermien neer. Sy lyk effens vriendeliker toe sy na hom kyk.

"Wel, dit was jou eerste," troos sy, "dit gaan tyd vat om –"

"Wie sê dit was ek wat dit aaklig gemaak het?" snou Ron.

"Niemand," sê Hermien en sy lyk verleë. "Ek het net gedink –"

"Jy't net gedink ek sal vrot wees?"

"Nee, natuurlik nie! Luister, jy't gesê dit was aaklig en toe't ek het —"

"Ek gaan my huiswerk doen," sê Ron kwaad, storm na die trappe wat na die seuns se slaapsale lei en verdwyn. Hermien kyk na Harry.

"Was hy vrot?"

"Nee," sê Harry lojaal.

Hermien lig haar wenkbroue.

"Wel, hy kon beter gespeel het," mompel Harry, "maar soos jy gesê het, dit was die eerste oefening . . ."

Daardie aand maak Harry en Ron nie veel vordering met hul huiswerk nie. Harry weet Ron dink net aan hoe vrot hy tydens die kwiddiek-oefening gespeel het en hy kan die kreet "*Griffindor gaan juuk kry*" nie uit sy kop kry nie.

Hulle bring die hele Sondag in die geselskamer deur met hul neuse in hul boeke, terwyl die vertrek vol en dan weer leeg word. Dis 'n lieflike sonskyndag en die meeste van hul mede-Griffindors is buite om die laaste sonskyn van die jaar te geniet. Teen die aand voel Harry of iemand sy brein voos gestamp het teen sy skedel!

"Weet jy, ons moet seker meer huiswerk in die week probeer doen," sê Harry vir Ron toe professor McGonagall se lang opstel oor die Inanimatus Towerspreuk uiteindelik klaar is en hulle met professor Sinistra se ewe lang en moeilike opstel oor Jupiter se mane begin.

"Ja," sê Ron. Hy vryf sy bloedbelope oë en gooi die vyfde opgefrommelde stuk perkament in die vuur. "Hoor hier — sal ons vir Hermien vra of ons kan kyk wat sy gedoen het?"

Harry loer na haar. Kromskeen sit op haar skoot en sy gesels vrolik met Ginny terwyl in die lug voor haar 'n paar vormlose elfsokkies met flitsende breipenne gebrei word.

"Nee," sê hy bedruk, "jy weet goed sy sal nie."

Hulle werk voort terwyl die lug voor die vensters al donkerder word. Die mense in die geselskamer raak weer minder. Teen half-twaalf kom Hermien gaap-gaap na hulle toe.

"Amper klaar?"

"Nee," sê Ron kortaf.

"Jupiter se grootste maan is Ganymede en nie Callisto nie," sê sy en wys oor Ron se skouer na 'n sin in sy Sterrekunde-opstel, "en dis lo wat vulkane het."

"Dankie," snou Ron en krap die verkeerde sinne dood.

"Jammer, ek het net —"

"Ja, wel, as jy net hierheen gekom het om te kritiseer —"

"Ron —"

“Ek het nie tyd om na ’n preek te luister nie, Hermien, ek is tot oor my ore toe –”

“Haai – kyk!”

Hermien wys na die naaste venster. Harry en Ron kyk ook soon-toe. ’n Besonder mooi steenuil sit op die vensterbank en staar na Ron.

“Is dit nie Hermes nie?” vra Hermien verbaas.

“Ja, wraggies, dit is!” Ron gooi sy veerpen neer en staan op. “Hoekom sal Percy vir my skryf?”

Hy stap na die venster en maak dit oop. Hermes vlieg in, gaan sit op Ron se opstel en hou sy been uit. ’n Brief is daaraan vasgemaak. Ron haal dit af en die uil vlieg dadelik weg, maar eers nadat hy Ron se tekening van Io vol inksore getrap het.

“Dis Percy se handskrif,” sê Ron toe hy weer gaan sit en na die woorde buite op die perkamentrol staar: *Ronald Weasley, Griffindor-huis, Hogwarts*. Hy kyk na die ander twee. “Wat dink julle gaan aan?”

“Maak dit oop!” sê Hermien gretig en Harry knik.

Ron rol die perkament oop en begin lees. Hoe verder hy lees, hoe dieper word sy frons. Toe hy klaar is, lyk hy gewalg. Hy stoot die brief na Hermien en Harry, wat oorleun om dit saam te lees.

Liewe Ron,

Ek het so pas gehoor (by niemand minder as die Minister vir Towerkuns self, wat dit by jou nuwe onderwyser, professor Umbridge, gehoor het) dat jy ’n Hogwarts-prefek is.

Ek was baie aangenaam verras deur die nuus en wil jou hiermee gelukwens. Ek moet erken ek het nog altyd gevrees dat jy die “Fred en George”-paadjie gaan stap eerder as om in my voetspore te volg, dus kan jy jou voorstel hoe ek gevoel het toe ek hoor dat jy jou nie meer teen gesag versit nie, maar besluit het om verantwoordelik te raak.

Maar ek wil meer doen as jou net gelukwens, Ron, ek wil vir jou raad gee, wat dan ook die rede is hoekom ek my brief in die nag stuur en nie met die gewone oggendpos nie. Hopelik sal jy dit ver van nuuskierige oë kan lees en sodoende lastige vrae vermy.

Ek het afgelei uit iets wat die Minister in ons gesprek laat glip het dat jy nog steeds met Harry Potter maats is. Ek moet jou waarsku, Ron, dat indien jy volhou om met daardie seun te assosieer, jy gevaar staan om jou kenteken te verloor. Ja, dit verbaas jou seker – jy voel seker dat Potter nog altyd Dompeldorius se witbroodjie was – maar ek voel verplig om vir jou te sê dat Dompeldorius nie veel langer in beheer van Hogwarts gaan wees nie en dat belangrike mense heeltemal ander – en waarskynlik akkurater – opvattinge oor Potter se gedrag het. Ek sal hiermee volstaan, maar as

jy, more in die Daaglikse Profeet kyk, sal jy sien hoe die wind waai – kyk ook of jy die uwe daarin raak sien!

Regtig, Ron, jy wil nie oor dieselfde kam as Potter geskeer word nie, dit kan baie skadelik vir jou vooruitsigte wees, en ek verwys nou ook na jou skoolse lewe. Soos jy seker weet – aangesien Vader saam met hom was – het Potter hierdie somer 'n dissiplinêre verhoor voor die hele Lowernaarshoërhof gehad en hy het nie goed gelyk nie. Wat my betref, is hy op 'n bloot tegniese puntjie vrygespreek, en baie van die mense met wie ek kontak het, is oortuig hy is skuldig.

Jy is seker bang om jou bande met Potter te verbreek – ek weet hy kan ongebalanseerd wees en vir al wat 'n mens weet, gewelddadig – maar indien jy enigsins hieroor bekommerd is, of as daar enigiets anders aan Potter se gedrag is wat jou pla, moet jy onmiddellik met Dolores Umbridge gaan praat. Sy is 'n baie aangename vrou en ek weet sy sal jou graag help.

Dit bring my by nog 'n titteltjie advies. Soos ek reeds gesê het, is dit dalk binnekort die einde van Dompeldorius se bewind by Hogwarts. Jou lojaliteit, Ron, moenie teenoor hom wees nie, maar teenoor die skool en die Ministerie. Ek is jammer om te hoor dat professor Umbridge tot dusver baie min hulp by die res van die personeel gekry het in haar pogings om die nodige veranderings by Hogwarts aan te bring (hoewel dit vanaf volgende week vir haar baie makliker behoort te wees – kyk hieroor ook in môre se Daaglikse Profeet!). Ek gaan hiermee volstaan: 'n student wat nou vir professor Umbridge help, kan baie goed geplaas wees vir toekomstige Hoofseun!

Ek is jammer dat ek die afgelope vakansie nie meer van jou gesien het nie. Dis vir my swaar om ons ouers te kritiseer, maar ek is bevrees ek kan nie langer onder een dak saam met hulle bly terwyl hulle met die gevaarlike groep om Dompeldorius meng nie. (As jy in enige stadium vir Moeder skryf, kan jy gerus vir haar sê dat 'n sekere Sturgis Podmore, nog 'n groot vriend van Dompeldorius, onlangs na Azkaban gestuur is vir 'n oortreding by die Ministerie. Dalk sal dit hulle oë laat oopgaan vir die soort kleinlike misdadigers met wie hulle deesdae meng.) Ek ag myself gelukkig dat ek nie ly onder die stigma van betrokkenheid by daardie mense nie – die Minister kan my nie beter behandel nie – en ek hoop, Ron, dat jy nie sal toelaat dat familiebande jou verblind vir ons ouers se onbesonne idees en optrede nie. Ek hoop van harte dat hulle mettertyd sal besef hoe verkeerd hulle is en ek sal natuurlik bereid wees om 'n volle apologie te aanvaar wanneer daardie dag aanbreek.

Dink baie mooi oor wat ek gesê het, veral oor Harry Potter, en nogmaals geluk met jou prefekskap.

Jou broer,

Percy

Harry kyk op na Ron.

"Wel," sê hy en probeer klink asof hy dit as 'n grap beskou, "as jy – hm – wat nou weer?" – hy kyk na Percy se brief – "o ja, 'bande wil sny', ek belowe ek sal nie gewelddadig raak nie."

"Gee dit hier," sê Ron en steek sy hand uit. "Hy is –" sê Ron terwyl hy Percy se brief middeldeur skeur, "die wêreld se –" hy skeur dit in kwarte "grootste –" hy skeur dit in agstes, "aap." Hy gooi die stukke in die vuur.

"Komaan, ons moet dit voor môre klaar hê," sê hy ferm en trek professor Sinistra se opstel nader.

Hermien kyk met 'n snaakse trek in haar oë na Ron.

"Gee dit hier," sê sy kortaf.

"Wat?" sê Ron.

"Gee julle opstelle vir my. Ek sal dit deurgaang en regmaak."

"Jy's nie ernstig nie! Jis, Hermien, dis wonderlik, wat kan ons sê –"

"Wat julle kan sê, is 'Ons belowe om nie weer ons huiswerk so laat te los nie'," sê sy terwyl sy albei haar hande uithou, maar sy lyk tog effens geamuseer.

"Baie dankie, Hermien," sê Harry floutjies. Hy gee sy opstel aan, sak terug in sy leunstoel en vryf sy oë.

Dis reeds ná middernag en buiten hulle drie en Kromskeen is die geselskamer leeg. Die enigste geluid kom van Hermien se veerpen waarmee sy hier en daar sinne doodkrap en die geritsel van papier soos sy feite in die boeke op die tafel naslaan. Harry is pootuit. Boonop is daar 'n nare, leë gevoel in sy maag wat niks met moegheid te doen het nie en alles met die brief wat nou in die hart van die vuur lê en krul.

Hy weet die helfte van die mense in Hogwarts dink hy is eienaardig, dalk selfs mal. Hy weet die *Daaglikse Profeet* maak al vir maande snedige aanmerkings oor hom, maar dis anders om dit so in Percy se handskrif te sien. Om te weet dat Percy vir Ron aanraai om nie met hom maats te wees nie en om hom by Umbridge te verklik. Dit, meer as enigiets anders, laat hom besef wat werklik om hom aangaan. Hy ken Percy al vier jaar, het saam met hom tydens die somervakansies in hulle huis gebly, het 'n tent met hom gedeel tydens die Kwiddiekwêreldbeker, Percy het selfs die vorige jaar vir hom volpunte gegee vir die tweede taak in die Drietowenaars-toernooi, en tog dink Percy nou hy is ongebalanseerd en selfs gewelddadig.

Hy besef met 'n opwelling van simpatie dat Sirius waarskynlik die enigste mens is wat kan verstaan hoe hy op hierdie oomblik voel

omdat Sirius hom in 'n soortgelyke situasie bevind. Amper almal in die towenaarswêreld dink Sirius is 'n gevaarlike noordenaar en 'n groot ondersteuner van Woldemort, en Sirius moet al veertien jaar lank daarmee saamleef . . .

Harry knipper sy oë. Hy het pas iets in die vuur gesien wat nie werklik daar kan wees nie. Dit was vir 'n oomblik sigbaar en het onmiddellik weer verdwyn. Nee . . . dit kan nie wees nie . . . hy het hom verbeel . . . dis omdat hy aan Sirius gedink het.

"Oukei, skryf dit neer," sê Hermien vir Ron en gee die opstel en 'n bladsy in haar eie handskrif vir hom aan. "Voeg dan hierdie gevolgtrekking wat ek vir jou geskryf het by."

"Hermien, jy is regtig die wonderlikste mens wat ek ken," sê Ron swakkies, "en as ek ooit weer met jou ongeskik is –"

"– dan sal ek weet dat jy nog normaal is," sê Hermien. "Harry, joune is oukei behalwe hierdie stuk aan die einde. Ek dink nie jy't lekker gehoor wat professor Sinistra gesê het nie. Europa was bedek met ys, nie rys nie – Harry?"

Harry het van sy stoel afgeglip en staan op sy knieë op die verweerde kaggelmatjie en staar na die vlamme.

"Hm – Harry?" sê Ron aarselend. "Wat maak jy?"

"Ek het nou net Sirius se kop in die vuur gesien," sê Harry kalm. Hy het Sirius se kop die vorige jaar in hierdie selfde vuur gesien en daarmee gepraat, maar tog, hy is nie seker dat hy dit hierdie keer regtig gesien het nie . . . dit was so vinnig . . .

"Sirius se kop?" herhaal Hermien. "Jy bedoel soos toe hy tydens die Drietowenaarstoernooi met jou wou praat? Maar hy sal tog nie nou nie, dis hopeloos te – Sirius!"

Sy snak na asem en staar na die vuur. Ron laat val sy veerpen. Daar, in die middel van die dansende vlamme, is Sirius se kop. Sy lang donker hare val om sy glimlaggende gesig.

"Ek het begin bang word julle sal bed toe gaan voor al die ander geloop het," sê hy. "Ek kyk nog al om die uur."

"Jy was al om die uur in die vuur?" lag Harry ongelowig.

"Net vir 'n paar sekondes, om te kyk of dit al veilig is."

"Maar wat as iemand jou gesien het?" vra Hermien angstig.

"Wel, ek dink 'n meisie – sy't na 'n eerstejaar gelyk – het my dalk vroeër vlugtig gesien, maar moenie worrie nie," sê Sirius vinnig toe Hermien haar hand oor haar mond klap, "ek was weg die oomblik toe sy terugkyk en ek wed sy't gedink ek's 'n misvormde stuk hout of iets."

"Maar Sirius, dis 'n vreeslike waagstuk –"

"Jy klink nes Molly," sê Sirius. "Dis die enigste manier hoe ek

Harry se brief kan beantwoord sonder 'n kode – kodes kan ontsyfer word.”

Toe hy Harry se brief noem, kyk Ron en Hermien na hom.

“Jy’t nie vir ons gesê jy’t vir Sirius geskryf nie!” sê Hermien beskuldigend.

“Ek het vergeet,” sê Harry, wat heeltemal waar is. Sy ontmoeting met Cho in die Uilhuis het dit heeltemal uit sy gedagtes gedryf. “Moenie so na my kyk nie, Hermien, daar’s nie ’n manier dat enige iemand enige geheime daaruit sou kon aflei nie, he, Sirius?”

“Nee, dit was baie goed,” glimlag Sirius. “In elk geval, ons moet gou maak, ingeval ons weer gesteur word: Jou litteken.”

“Wat van –” begin Ron, maar Hermien val hom in die rede.

“Ons sal later vir jou sê. Gaan voort, Sirius.”

“Wel, ek weet dis nie lekker as dit seer is nie, maar ons dink nie jy hoef jou daaroor te bekommer nie. Dit was verlede jaar dikwels seer, nè?”

“Ja, en Dompeldorius het gesê dis wanneer Woldemort ’n besonder sterk emosie ervaar,” sê Harry en ignoreer soos altyd Ron en Hermien se sidderings. “Dalk was hy net – wel – baie kwaad of iets die nag toe ek daardie detensie gehad het.”

“Wel, noudat hy terug is, gaan dit beslis meer gereeld gebeur.”

“Dan dink julle nie dit het iets te doen met Umbridge wat aan my geraak het toe ek by haar detensie gehad het nie?”

“Ek twyfel. Ek ken haar van hoorsê en ek is seker sy’s nie ’n Doodseter nie –”

“Sy’s mislik genoeg om een te kan wees,” sê Harry heftig en Ron en Hermien knik met oorgawe.

“Ja, maar die wêreld is nie verdeel in goeie mense en Doodseters nie,” sê Sirius met ’n wrang glimlag. “Maar ek weet sy’s ’n gemene mens – julle moet vir Remus hoor.”

“Ken Lupin haar dan?” Harry dink skielik aan Umbridge se aanmerkings oor gevaarlike halfbloeders tydens haar eerste les.

“Nee, maar sy het twee jaar gelede ’n stuk anti-weerwolfwetgewing opgestel wat dit vir hom amper onmoontlik maak om werk te kry.”

Harry onthou hoe verslons Lupin deesdae lyk en sy haat vir Umbridge neem toe.

“Wat het sy teen weerwolwe?” vra Hermien verontwaardig.

“Ek skat sy’s bang vir hulle. Blykbaar haat sy halfmense. Sy’t verlede jaar ’n veldtog gevoer om die meermense te laat bymekaarmaak en merk. Hoe jy jou tyd en energie kan mors met die vervolging van meermense terwyl teertoue soos Skepsel los loop, weet nugter.”

Ron lag, maar Hermien lyk ontsteld.

"Sirius!" sê sy verwykend. "Regtig, ek is seker Skepsel sal reageer as jy net 'n bietjie moeite met hom wil doen. Jy is immers al wat hy oor het en professor Dompeldorius het gesê –"

"So, hoe is Umbridge se klasse?" val Sirius haar in die rede. "Leer jy vir julle hoe om halfbloeders dood te maak?"

"Nee, sy laat ons glad nie toor nie!" sê Harry en maak of hy nie Hermien se verontwaardigde kyk toe sy in die rede geval word, sien nie.

"Al wat ons doen, is om uit die simpel handboek te lees," sê Ron.

"A, wel, dit maak sin. Volgens ons bronne binne die Ministerie wil Broddelwerk julle nie vir oorlog laat oplei nie."

"Vir oorlog laat oplei!" herhaal Harry ongelowig. "Wat dink hy doen ons? Dink hy ons is besig om 'n soort towenaarsweermag te vorm?"

"Dis presies wat hy dink. Of liever, dis wat hy bang is Dompeldorius dalk doen – dat hy sy eie privaat leer vorm waarmee hy die Ministerie vir Towerkuns kan aanval."

Dis 'n rukkie stil en toe sê Ron: "Dis die simpelste ding wat ek nog ooit gehoor het en dit sluit al die goed wat Mania Goedlief sê in."

"Dus mag ons nie leer hoe om ons teen die Donker Kunste te verdedig nie omdat Broddelwerk bang is ons sal die towerspreuke teen die Ministerie gebruik?" Hermien lyk woedend.

"Jip," sê Sirius. "Broddelwerk reken Dompeldorius sal vir niks stuit in sy begeerte om beheer oor te neem nie. Hy voel by die dag meer bedreig deur Dompeldorius. Dis net 'n kwessie van tyd voor hy vir Dompeldorius op die een of ander vals aanklag laat arresteer."

Dit laat Harry aan Percy se brief dink.

"Weet jy van iets wat môre oor Dompeldorius in die *Daaglikse Profet* gaan wees? Ron se broer Percy sê –"

"Ek weet nie," sê Sirius. "Ek het die hele naweek niks van die Orde gehoor nie, hulle is almal besig. Dis net ek en Skepsel . . ."

Sirius se stem klink beslis bitter.

"Dan het jy nog niks van Hagrid gehoor nie?"

"A . . ." sê Sirius, "wel, hy moes teen dié tyd al terug gewees het. Niemand weet wat van hom geword het nie." Toe hy hulle verwese gesigte sien, voeg hy vinnig by: "Maar Dompeldorius is nie bekommerd nie, moet julle dus nie opwerk nie, ek is seker Hagrid is oukei."

"Maar as hy al terug moes wees . . ." sê Hermien in 'n klein stemmetjie.

“Madame Maxime was saam met hom. Ons was met haar in verbinding en sy’t gesê hulle het mekaar met die terugreis langs die pad verloor. Maar daar’s niks wat daarop dui dat hy seergekry het of – wel, niks wat ’n mens laat dink dat hy nie heeltemal oukei is nie.”

Harry, Ron en Hermien kyk skepties en hoogs bekommerd na mekaar.

“Luister, moenie te veel oor Hagrid uitvra nie,” sê Sirius vinnig. “Dit sal net meer aandag vestig op die feit dat hy nog nie terug is nie en ek weet dis juis wat Dompeldorius nie wil hê nie. Hagrid is taai, hy sal oukei wees.” Toe dit lyk of hierdie woorde hulle nie opbeur nie, voeg Sirius by: “Wanneer is julle volgende Hogsmeade-naweek? Ek het gedink aangesien ons met die hondvermomming by die stasie weggekóm het, kan ek –”

“NEE!” sê Harry en Hermien gelyk en baie hard.

“Sirius, het jy nie die *Daaglikse Profeet* gesien nie?” vra Hermien angstig.

“O, dit.” Sirius grynslag. “Daar is altyd hierdie raaiskote oor waar ek is, maar hulle weet niks –”

“Ja, maar ons dink hierdie keer weet hulle dalk iets,” sê Harry. “Iets wat Malfoy op die trein gesê het, het ons laat dink hy weet dit was jy. Sy pa was ook by die stasie – weet jy, Lucius Malfoy. Moenie kom nie, Sirius, as Malfoy jou weer moet sien –”

“Goed, goed, ek kry die boodskap,” sê Sirius, maar hy lyk baie ontevrede. “Dit was net ’n idee, het gedink dit sal lekker wees om mekaar te sien.”

“Dit sal, maar ek wil nie hê jy moet teruggaan Azkaban toe nie,” sê Harry.

Daar is ’n stilte waarin Sirius met ’n frons tussen sy versonke oë uit die vuur na Harry staar.

“Jy’s minder soos jou pa as wat ek gedink het,” sê hy eindelijk en sy stem is beslis koel. “Vir James sou die risiko pret gewees het.”

“Luister –”

“Wel, ek moet gaan, ek hoor vir Skepsel by die trappe,” sê Sirius, maar Harry is seker hy lieg. “Ek sal vir jou skryf en laat weet wanneer ek weer vuur toe kan kom, oukei? As jy die kans wil waag.”

Daar is ’n klein *plop*-geluidjie en toe flikker net die vlamme op die plek waar Sirius se kop was.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



THE HOGWARTS HIGH INQUISITOR

They had expected to have to comb Hermione's *Daily Prophet* carefully next morning to find the article Percy had mentioned in his letter. However, the departing delivery owl had barely cleared the top of the milk jug when Hermione let out a huge gasp and flattened the newspaper to reveal a large photograph of Dolores Umbridge, smiling widely and blinking slowly at them from beneath the headline:

**MINISTRY SEEKS EDUCATIONAL REFORM DOLORES
UMBRIDGE APPOINTED FIRST-EVER "HIGH INQUISITOR"**

"“High Inquisitor?”” said Harry darkly, his half-eaten bit of toast

slipping from his fingers. "What does *that* mean?"

Hermione read aloud:

"In a surprise move last night the Ministry of Magic passed new legislation giving itself an unprecedented level of control at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"The Minister has been growing uneasy about goings-on at Hogwarts for some time,' said Junior Assistant to the Minister, Percy Weasley. 'He is now responding to concerns voiced by anxious parents, who feel the school may be moving in a direction they do not approve.'

"This is not the first time in recent weeks Fudge has used new laws to effect improvements at the Wizarding school. As recently as August 30th Educational Decree Twenty-two was passed, to ensure that, in the event of the current headmaster being unable to provide a candidate for a teaching post, the Ministry should select an appropriate person.

"That's how Dolores Umbridge came to be appointed to the teaching staff at Hogwarts,' said Weasley last night. 'Dumbledore couldn't find anyone, so the Minister put in Umbridge and of course, she's been an immediate success —'"

"She's been a WHAT?" said Harry loudly.

"Wait, there's more," said Hermione grimly.

"— an immediate success, totally revolutionizing the teaching of Defense Against the Dark Arts and providing the Minister with on-the-ground feedback about what's really happening at Hogwarts.'

"It is this last function that the Ministry has now formalized

with the passing of Educational Decree Twenty-three, which creates the new position of 'Hogwarts High Inquisitor.'

"'This is an exciting new phase in the Minister's plan to get to grips with what some are calling the "falling standards" at Hogwarts,' said Weasley. 'The Inquisitor will have powers to inspect her fellow educators and make sure that they are coming up to scratch. Professor Umbridge has been offered this position in addition to her own teaching post, and we are delighted to say that she has accepted.'

"The Ministry's new moves have received enthusiastic support from parents of students at Hogwarts.

"'I feel much easier in my mind now that I know that Dumbledore is being subjected to fair and objective evaluation,' said Mr. Lucius Malfoy, 41, speaking from his Wiltshire mansion last night. 'Many of us with our children's best interests at heart have been concerned about some of Dumbledore's eccentric decisions in the last few years and will be glad to know that the Ministry is keeping an eye on the situation.'

"Among those 'eccentric decisions' are undoubtedly the controversial staff appointments previously described in this newspaper, which have included the hiring of werewolf Remus Lupin, half-giant Rubeus Hagrid, and delusional ex-Auror 'Mad-Eye' Moody.

"Rumors abound, of course, that Albus Dumbledore, once Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, is no longer up to the task of managing the prestigious school of Hogwarts.

“‘I think the appointment of the Inquisitor is a first step toward ensuring that Hogwarts has a headmaster in whom we can all repose confidence,’ said a Ministry insider last night.

“Wizengamot elders Griselda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden have resigned in protest at the introduction of the post of Inquisitor to Hogwarts.

“‘Hogwarts is a school, not an outpost of Cornelius Fudge’s office,’ said Madam Marchbanks. ‘This is a further disgusting attempt to discredit Albus Dumbledore.’ (For a full account of Madam Marchbanks’ alleged links to subversive goblin groups, turn to page 17.)”

Hermione finished reading and looked across the table at the other two.

“So now we know how we ended up with Umbridge! Fudge passed this ‘Educational Decree’ and forced her on us! And now he’s given her the power to inspect other teachers!” Hermione was breathing fast and her eyes were very bright. “I can’t believe this. It’s *outrageous* . . . ”

“I know it is,” said Harry. He looked down at his right hand, clenched upon the tabletop, and saw the faint white outline of the words Umbridge had forced him to cut into his skin.

But a grin was unfurling on Ron’s face.

“What?” said Harry and Hermione together, staring at him.

“Oh, I can’t wait to see McGonagall inspected,” said Ron happily. “Umbridge won’t know what’s hit her.”

“Well, come on,” said Hermione, jumping up, “we’d better get going, if she’s inspecting Binns’s class we don’t want to be late . . . ”

But Professor Umbridge was not inspecting their History of Magic lesson, which was just as dull as the previous Monday, nor was she in Snape's dungeon when they arrived for double Potions, where Harry's moonstone essay was handed back to him with a large, spiky black D scrawled in an upper corner.

"I have awarded you the grades you would have received if you presented this work in your O.W.L.," said Snape with a smirk, as he swept among them, passing back their homework. "This should give you a realistic idea of what to expect in your examination."

Snape reached the front of the class and turned to face them.

"The general standard of this homework was abysmal. Most of you would have failed had this been your examination. I expect to see a great deal more effort for this week's essay on the various varieties of venom antidotes, or I shall have to start handing out detentions to those dunces who get D's."

He smirked as Malfoy sniggered and said in a carrying whisper, "Some people got *D's*? Ha!"

Harry realized that Hermione was looking sideways to see what grade he had received; he slid his moonstone essay back into his bag as quickly as possible, feeling that he would rather keep that information private.

Determined not to give Snape an excuse to fail him this lesson, Harry read and reread every line of the instructions on the blackboard at least three times before acting on them. His Strengthening Solution was not precisely the clear turquoise shade of Hermione's but it was at least blue rather than pink, like Neville's, and he delivered a flask of it to Snape's desk at the end of the lesson.

with a feeling of mingled defiance and relief.

“Well, that wasn’t as bad as last week, was it?” said Hermione, as they climbed the steps out of the dungeon and made their way across the entrance hall toward lunch. “And the homework didn’t go too badly either, did it?”

When neither Ron nor Harry answered, she pressed on, “I mean, all right, I didn’t expect the top grade, not if he’s marking to O.W.L. standard, but a pass is quite encouraging at this stage, wouldn’t you say?”

Harry made a noncommittal noise in his throat.

“Of course, a lot can happen between now and the exam, we’ve got plenty of time to improve, but the grades we’re getting now are a sort of baseline, aren’t they? Something we can build on . . .”

They sat down together at the Gryffindor table.

“Obviously, I’d have been *thrilled* if I’d gotten an O —”

“Hermione,” said Ron sharply, “if you want to know what grades we got, ask.”

“I don’t — I didn’t mean — well, if you want to tell me —”

“I got a P,” said Ron, ladling soup into his bowl. “Happy?”

“Well, that’s nothing to be ashamed of,” said Fred, who had just arrived at the table with George and Lee Jordan and was sitting down on Harry’s right. “Nothing wrong with a good healthy P.”

“But,” said Hermione, “doesn’t P stand for . . .”

“‘Poor,’ yeah,” said Lee Jordan. “Still, better than D, isn’t it? ‘Dreadful’?”

Harry felt his face grow warm and faked a small coughing fit over his roll. When he emerged from this he was sorry to find that

Hermione was still in full flow about O.W.L. grades.

“So top grade’s O for ‘Outstanding,’” she was saying, “and then there’s A —”

“No, E,” George corrected her, “E for ‘Exceeds Expectations.’ And I’ve always thought Fred and I should’ve got E in everything, because we exceeded expectations just by turning up for the exams.”

They all laughed except Hermione, who plowed on, “So after E, it’s A for ‘Acceptable,’ and that’s the last pass grade, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” said Fred, dunking an entire roll in his soup, transferring it to his mouth, and swallowing it whole.

“Then you get P for ‘Poor,’” — Ron raised both his arms in mock celebration — “and D for ‘Dreadful.’”

“And then T,” George reminded him.

“T?” asked Hermione, looking appalled. “Even lower than a D? What on earth does that stand for?”

“‘Troll,’” said George promptly.

Harry laughed again, though he was not sure whether or not George was joking. He imagined trying to conceal from Hermione that he had received T’s in all his O.W.L.s and immediately resolved to work harder from now on.

“You lot had an inspected lesson yet?” Fred asked them.

“No,” said Hermione at once, “have you?”

“Just now, before lunch,” said George. “Charms.”

“What was it like?” Harry and Hermione asked together.

Fred shrugged.

“Not that bad. Umbridge just lurked in the corner making notes on

a clipboard. You know what Flitwick's like, he treated her like a guest, didn't seem to bother him at all. She didn't say much. Asked Alicia a couple of questions about what the classes are normally like, Alicia told her they were really good, that was it."

"I can't see old Flitwick getting marked down," said George, "he usually gets everyone through their exams all right."

"Who've you got this afternoon?" Fred asked Harry.

"Trelawney —"

"A T if ever I saw one —"

"— and Umbridge herself."

"Well, be a good boy and keep your temper with Umbridge today," said George. "Angelina'll do her nut if you miss any more Quidditch practices."

But Harry did not have to wait for Defense Against the Dark Arts to meet Professor Umbridge. He was pulling out his dream diary in a seat at the very back of the shadowy Divination room when Ron elbowed him in the ribs and, looking round, he saw Professor Umbridge emerging through the trapdoor in the floor. The class, which had been talking cheerily, fell silent at once. The abrupt fall in the noise level made Professor Trelawney, who had been wafting about handing out *Dream Oracles*, look round.

"Good afternoon, Professor Trelawney," said Professor Umbridge with her wide smile. "You received my note, I trust? Giving the time and date of your inspection?"

Professor Trelawney nodded curtly and, looking very disgruntled, turned her back on Professor Umbridge and continued to give out books. Still smiling, Professor Umbridge grasped the back of the

nearest armchair and pulled it to the front of the class so that it was a few inches behind Professor Trelawney's seat. She then sat down, took her clipboard from her flowery bag, and looked up expectantly, waiting for the class to begin.

Professor Trelawney pulled her shawls tight about her with slightly trembling hands and surveyed the class through her hugely magnifying lenses. "We shall be continuing our study of prophetic dreams today," she said in a brave attempt at her usual mystic tones, though her voice shook slightly. "Divide into pairs, please, and interpret each other's latest nighttime visions with the aid of the *Oracle*."

She made as though to sweep back to her seat, saw Professor Umbridge sitting right beside it, and immediately veered left toward Parvati and Lavender, who were already deep in discussion about Parvati's most recent dream.

Harry opened his copy of *The Dream Oracle*, watching Umbridge covertly. She was making notes on her clipboard now. After a few minutes she got to her feet and began to pace the room in Trelawney's wake, listening to her conversations with students and posing questions here and there. Harry bent his head hurriedly over his book.

"Think of a dream, quick," he told Ron, "in case the old toad comes our way."

"I did it last time," Ron protested, "it's your turn, you tell me one."

"Oh, I dunno . . ." said Harry desperately, who could not remember dreaming anything at all over the last few days. "Let's say I dreamed I was . . . drowning Snape in my cauldron. Yeah, that'll

do . . .”

Ron chortled as he opened his *Dream Oracle*.

“Okay, we’ve got to add your age to the date you had the dream, the number of letters in the subject . . . would that be ‘drowning’ or ‘cauldron’ or ‘Snape’?”

“It doesn’t matter, pick any of them,” said Harry, chancing a glance behind him. Professor Umbridge was now standing at Professor Trelawney’s shoulder making notes while the Divination teacher questioned Neville about his dream diary.

“What night did you dream this again?” Ron said, immersed in calculations.

“I dunno, last night, whenever you like,” Harry told him, trying to listen to what Umbridge was saying to Professor Trelawney. They were only a table away from him and Ron now. Professor Umbridge was making another note on her clipboard and Professor Trelawney was looking extremely put out.

“Now,” said Umbridge, looking up at Trelawney, “you’ve been in this post how long, exactly?”

Professor Trelawney scowled at her, arms crossed and shoulders hunched as though wishing to protect herself as much as possible from the indignity of the inspection. After a slight pause in which she seemed to decide that the question was not so offensive that she could reasonably ignore it, she said in a deeply resentful tone, “Nearly sixteen years.”

“Quite a period,” said Professor Umbridge, making a note on her clipboard. “So it was Professor Dumbledore who appointed you?”

“That’s right,” said Professor Trelawney shortly.

Professor Umbridge made another note.

“And you are a great-great-granddaughter of the celebrated Seer Cassandra Trelawney?”

“Yes,” said Professor Trelawney, holding her head a little higher. Another note on the clipboard.

“But I think — correct me if I am mistaken — that you are the first in your family since Cassandra to be possessed of second sight?”

“These things often skip — er — three generations,” said Professor Trelawney.

Professor Umbridge’s toadlike smile widened.

“Of course,” she said sweetly, making yet another note. “Well, if you could just predict something for me, then?”

She looked up inquiringly, still smiling. Professor Trelawney had stiffened as though unable to believe her ears.

“I don’t understand you,” said Professor Trelawney, clutching convulsively at the shawl around her scrawny neck.

“I’d like you to make a prediction for me,” said Professor Umbridge very clearly.

Harry and Ron were not the only people watching and listening sneakily from behind their books now; most of the class were staring transfixed at Professor Trelawney as she drew herself up to her full height, her beads and bangles clinking.

“The Inner Eye does not See upon command!” she said in scandalized tones.

“I see,” said Professor Umbridge softly, making yet another note on her clipboard.

"I — but — but . . . *wait!*" said Professor Trelawney suddenly, in an attempt at her usual ethereal voice, though the mystical effect was ruined somewhat by the way it was shaking with anger. "I . . . I think I *do* see something . . . something that concerns *you*. . . . Why, I sense something . . . something dark . . . some grave peril . . ."

Professor Trelawney pointed a shaking finger at Professor Umbridge who continued to smile blandly at her, eyebrows raised.

"I am afraid . . . I am afraid that you are in grave danger!" Professor Trelawney finished dramatically.

There was a pause. Professor Umbridge's eyebrows were still raised.

"Right," she said softly, scribbling on her clipboard once more. "Well, if that's really the best you can do . . ."

She turned away, leaving Professor Trelawney standing rooted to the spot, her chest heaving. Harry caught Ron's eye and knew that Ron was thinking exactly the same as he was. They both knew that Professor Trelawney was an old fraud, but on the other hand, they loathed Umbridge so much that they felt very much on Trelawney's side — until she swooped down on them a few seconds later, that was.

"Well?" she said, snapping her long fingers under Harry's nose, uncharacteristically brisk. "Let me see the start you've made on your dream diary, please."

And by the time she had interpreted Harry's dreams at the top of her voice (all of which, even the ones that involved eating porridge, apparently foretold a gruesome and early death), he was feeling much less sympathetic toward her. All the while, Professor Umbridge

stood a few feet away, making notes on that clipboard, and when the bell rang she descended the silver ladder first so that she was waiting for them all when they reached their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson ten minutes later.

She was humming and smiling to herself when they entered the room. Harry and Ron told Hermione, who had been in Arithmancy, exactly what had happened in Divination while they all took out their copies of *Defensive Magical Theory*, but before Hermione could ask any questions Professor Umbridge had called them all to order and silence fell.

“Wands away,” she instructed them all smilingly, and those people who had been hopeful enough to take them out sadly returned them to their bags. “As we finished chapter one last lesson, I would like you all to turn to page nineteen today and commence chapter two, ‘Common Defensive Theories and Their Derivation.’ There will be no need to talk.”

Still smiling her wide, self-satisfied smile, she sat down at her desk. The class gave an audible sigh as it turned, as one, to page nineteen. Harry wondered dully whether there were enough chapters in the book to keep them reading through all this year’s lessons and was on the point of checking the contents when he noticed that Hermione had her hand in the air again.

Professor Umbridge had noticed too, and what was more, she seemed to have worked out a strategy for just such an eventuality. Instead of trying to pretend she had not noticed Hermione, she got to her feet and walked around the front row of desks until they were face-to-face, then she bent down and whispered, so that the rest of the

class could not hear, “What is it this time, Miss Granger?”

“I’ve already read chapter two,” said Hermione.

“Well then, proceed to chapter three.”

“I’ve read that too. I’ve read the whole book.”

Professor Umbridge blinked but recovered her poise almost instantly.

“Well, then, you should be able to tell me what Slinkhard says about counterjinxes in chapter fifteen.”

“He says that counterjinxes are improperly named,” said Hermione promptly. “He says ‘counterjinx’ is just a name people give their jinxes when they want to make them sound more acceptable.”

Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows, and Harry knew she was impressed against her will.

“But I disagree,” Hermione continued.

Professor Umbridge’s eyebrows rose a little higher and her gaze became distinctly colder.

“You disagree?”

“Yes, I do,” said Hermione, who, unlike Umbridge, was not whispering, but speaking in a clear, carrying voice that had by now attracted the rest of the class’s attention. “Mr. Slinkhard doesn’t like jinxes, does he? But I think they can be very useful when they’re used defensively.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” said Professor Umbridge, forgetting to whisper and straightening up. “Well, I’m afraid it is Mr. Slinkhard’s opinion, and not yours, that matters within this classroom, Miss Granger.”

“But —” Hermione began.

“That is enough,” said Professor Umbridge. She walked back to the front of the class and stood before them, all the jauntiness she had shown at the beginning of the lesson gone. “Miss Granger, I am going to take five points from Gryffindor House.”

There was an outbreak of muttering at this.

“What for?” said Harry angrily.

“Don’t you get involved!” Hermione whispered urgently to him.

“For disrupting my class with pointless interruptions,” said Professor Umbridge smoothly. “I am here to teach you using a Ministry-approved method that does not include inviting students to give their opinions on matters about which they understand very little. Your previous teachers in this subject may have allowed you more license, but as none of them — with the possible exception of Professor Quirrell, who did at least appear to have restricted himself to age-appropriate subjects — would have passed a Ministry inspection —”

“Yeah, Quirrell was a great teacher,” said Harry loudly, “there was just that minor drawback of him having Lord Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head.”

This pronouncement was followed by one of the loudest silences Harry had ever heard. Then —

“I think another week’s detentions would do you some good, Mr. Potter,” said Umbridge sleekly.

The cut on the back of Harry’s hand had barely healed and by the following morning, it was bleeding again. He did not complain.

during the evening's detention; he was determined not to give Umbridge the satisfaction; over and over again he wrote *I must not tell lies* and not a sound escaped his lips, though the cut deepened with every letter.

The very worst part of this second week's worth of detentions was, just as George had predicted, Angelina's reaction. She cornered him just as he arrived at the Gryffindor table for breakfast on Tuesday and shouted so loudly that Professor McGonagall came sweeping down upon the pair of them from the staff table.

"Miss Johnson, how *dare* you make such a racket in the Great Hall! Five points from Gryffindor!"

"But Professor — he's gone and landed himself in detention *again* —"

"What's this, Potter?" said Professor McGonagall sharply, rounding on Harry. "Detention? From whom?"

"From Professor Umbridge," muttered Harry, not meeting Professor McGonagall's beady, square-framed eyes.

"Are you telling me," she said, lowering her voice so that the group of curious Ravenclaws behind them could not hear, "that after the warning I gave you last Monday you lost your temper in Professor Umbridge's class again?"

"Yes," Harry muttered, speaking to the floor.

"Potter, you must get a grip on yourself! You are heading for serious trouble! Another five points from Gryffindor!"

"But — what? Professor, no!" Harry said, furious at this injustice. "I'm already being punished by *her*, why do you have to take points as well?"

“Because detentions do not appear to have any effect on you whatsoever!” said Professor McGonagall tartly. “No, not another word of complaint, Potter! And as for you, Miss Johnson, you will confine your shouting matches to the Quidditch pitch in future or risk losing the team Captaincy!”

She strode back toward the staff table. Angelina gave Harry a look of deepest disgust and stalked away, upon which Harry flung himself onto the bench beside Ron, fuming.

“She’s taken points off Gryffindor because I’m having my hand sliced open every night! How is that fair, *how?*”

“I know, mate,” said Ron sympathetically, tipping bacon onto Harry’s plate, “she’s bang out of order.”

Hermione, however, merely rustled the pages of her *Daily Prophet* and said nothing.

“You think McGonagall was right, do you?” said Harry angrily to the picture of Cornelius Fudge obscuring Hermione’s face.

“I wish she hadn’t taken points from you, but I think she’s right to warn you not to lose your temper with Umbridge,” said Hermione’s voice, while Fudge gesticulated forcefully from the front page, clearly giving some kind of speech.

Harry did not speak to Hermione all through Charms, but when they entered Transfiguration he forgot his anger; Professor Umbridge and her clipboard were sitting in a corner and the sight of her drove the memory of breakfast right out of his head.

“Excellent,” whispered Ron, as they sat down in their usual seats. “Let’s see Umbridge get what she deserves.”

Professor McGonagall marched into the room without giving the

slightest indication that she knew Professor Umbridge was there.

“That will do,” she said and silence fell immediately. “Mr. Finnigan, kindly come here and hand back the homework — Miss Brown, please take this box of mice — don’t be silly, girl, they won’t hurt you — and hand one to each student —”

“*Hem, hem,*” said Professor Umbridge, employing the same silly little cough she had used to interrupt Dumbledore on the first night of term. Professor McGonagall ignored her. Seamus handed back Harry’s essay; Harry took it without looking at him and saw, to his relief, that he had managed an A.

“Right then, everyone, listen closely — Dean Thomas, if you do that to the mouse again I shall put you in detention — most of you have now successfully vanished your snails and even those who were left with a certain amount of shell have the gist of the spell. Today we shall be —”

“*Hem, hem,*” said Professor Umbridge.

“*Yes?*” said Professor McGonagall, turning round, her eyebrows so close together they seemed to form one long, severe line.

“I was just wondering, Professor, whether you received my note telling you of the date and time of your inspec —”

“Obviously I received it, or I would have asked you what you are doing in my classroom,” said Professor McGonagall, turning her back firmly on Professor Umbridge. Many of the students exchanged looks of glee. “As I was saying, today we shall be practicing the altogether more difficult vanishment of mice. Now, the Vanishing Spell —”

“*Hem, hem.*”

"I wonder," said Professor McGonagall in cold fury, turning on Professor Umbridge, "how you expect to gain an idea of my usual teaching methods if you continue to interrupt me? You see, I do not generally permit people to talk when I am talking."

Professor Umbridge looked as though she had just been slapped in the face. She did not speak, but straightened the parchment on her clipboard and began scribbling furiously. Looking supremely unconcerned, Professor McGonagall addressed the class once more.

"As I was saying, the Vanishing Spell becomes more difficult with the complexity of the animal to be vanished. The snail, as an invertebrate, does not present much of a challenge; the mouse, as a mammal, offers a much greater one. This is not, therefore, magic you can accomplish with your mind on your dinner. So — you know the incantation, let me see what you can do . . ."

"How she can lecture me about not losing my temper with Umbridge!" Harry said to Ron under his voice, but he was grinning; his anger with Professor McGonagall had quite evaporated.

Professor Umbridge did not follow Professor McGonagall around the class as she had followed Professor Trelawney; perhaps she thought that Professor McGonagall would not permit it. She did, however, take many more notes while she sat in her corner, and when Professor McGonagall finally told them all to pack away, rose with a grim expression on her face.

"Well, it's a start," said Ron, holding up a long, wriggling mouse tail and dropping it back into the box Lavender was passing around.

As they filed out of the classroom, Harry saw Professor Umbridge approach the teacher's desk; he nudged Ron, who nudged Hermione

in turn, and the three of them deliberately fell back to eavesdrop.

“How long have you been teaching at Hogwarts?” Professor Umbridge asked.

“Thirty-nine years this December,” said Professor McGonagall brusquely, snapping her bag shut.

Professor Umbridge made a note.

“Very well,” she said, “you will receive the results of your inspection in ten days’ time.”

“I can hardly wait,” said Professor McGonagall in a coldly indifferent voice, and she strode off toward the door. “Hurry up, you three,” she added, sweeping Harry, Ron, and Hermione before her. Harry could not help giving her a faint smile and could have sworn he received one in return.

He had thought that the next time he would see Umbridge would be in his detention that evening, but he was wrong. When they walked down the lawns toward the forest for Care of Magical Creatures, they found her and her clipboard waiting for them beside Professor Grubbly-Plank.

“You do not usually take this class, is that correct?” Harry heard her ask as they arrived at the trestle table where the group of captive bowtruckles were scrabbling around for wood lice like so many living twigs.

“Quite correct,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank, hands behind her back and bouncing on the balls of her feet. “I am a substitute teacher standing in for Professor Hagrid.”

Harry exchanged uneasy looks with Ron and Hermione. Malfoy was whispering with Crabbe and Goyle; he would surely love this

opportunity to tell tales on Hagrid to a member of the Ministry.

“Hmm,” said Professor Umbridge, dropping her voice, though Harry could still hear her quite clearly, “I wonder — the headmaster seems strangely reluctant to give me any information on the matter — can *you* tell me what is causing Professor Hagrid’s very extended leave of absence?”

Harry saw Malfoy look up eagerly.

“‘Fraid I can’t,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank breezily. “Don’t know anything more about it than you do. Got an owl from Dumbledore, would I like a couple of weeks teaching work, accepted — that’s as much as I know. Well . . . shall I get started then?”

“Yes, please do,” said Professor Umbridge, scribbling upon her clipboard.

Umbridge took a different tack in this class and wandered among the students, questioning them on magical creatures. Most people were able to answer well and Harry’s spirits lifted somewhat; at least the class was not letting Hagrid down.

“Overall,” said Professor Umbridge, returning to Professor Grubbly-Plank’s side after a lengthy interrogation of Dean Thomas, “how do you, as a temporary member of staff — an objective outsider, I suppose you might say — how do you find Hogwarts? Do you feel you receive enough support from the school management?”

“Oh, yes, Dumbledore’s excellent,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank heartily. “No, I’m very happy with the way things are run, very happy indeed.”

Looking politely incredulous, Umbridge made a tiny note on her clipboard and went on, “And what are you planning to cover with

this class this year — assuming, of course, that Professor Hagrid does not return?”

“Oh, I’ll take them through the creatures that most often come up in O.W.L.,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank. “Not much left to do — they’ve studied unicorns and nifflers, I thought we’d cover porlocks and kneazles, make sure they can recognize crups and knarls, you know.”

“Well, *you* seem to know what you’re doing, at any rate,” said Professor Umbridge, making a very obvious tick on her clipboard. Harry did not like the emphasis she put on “*you*” and liked it even less when she put her next question to Goyle: “Now, I hear there have been injuries in this class?”

Goyle gave a stupid grin. Malfoy hastened to answer the question.

“That was me,” he said. “I was slashed by a hippogriff.”

“A hippogriff?” said Professor Umbridge, now scribbling frantically.

“Only because he was too stupid to listen to what Hagrid told him to do,” said Harry angrily.

Both Ron and Hermione groaned. Professor Umbridge turned her head slowly in Harry’s direction.

“Another night’s detention, I think,” she said softly. “Well, thank you very much, Professor Grubbly-Plank, I think that’s all I need here. You will be receiving the results of your inspection within ten days.”

“Jolly good,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank, and Professor Umbridge set off back across the lawn to the castle.

It was nearly midnight when Harry left Umbridge's office that night, his hand now bleeding so severely that it was staining the scarf he had wrapped around it. He expected the common room to be empty when he returned, but Ron and Hermione had sat up waiting for him. He was pleased to see them, especially as Hermione was disposed to be sympathetic rather than critical.

"Here," she said anxiously, pushing a small bowl of yellow liquid toward him, "soak your hand in that, it's a solution of strained and pickled murtlap tentacles, it should help."

Harry placed his bleeding, aching hand into the bowl and experienced a wonderful feeling of relief. Crookshanks curled around his legs, purring loudly, and then leapt into his lap and settled down.

"Thanks," he said gratefully, scratching behind Crookshanks's ears with his left hand.

"I still reckon you should complain about this," said Ron in a low voice.

"No," said Harry flatly.

"McGonagall would go nuts if she knew —"

"Yeah, she probably would," said Harry. "And how long d'you reckon it'd take Umbridge to pass another Decree saying anyone who complains about the High Inquisitor gets sacked immediately?"

Ron opened his mouth to retort but nothing came out and after a moment he closed it again in a defeated sort of way.

"She's an awful woman," said Hermione in a small voice. "Awful. You know, I was just saying to Ron when you came in . . . we've got to do something about her."

“I suggested poison,” said Ron grimly.

“No . . . I mean, something about what a dreadful teacher she is, and how we’re not going to learn any defense from her at all,” said Hermione.

“Well, what can we do about that?” said Ron, yawning. “S’ too late, isn’t it? She got the job, she’s here to stay, Fudge’ll make sure of that.”

“Well,” said Hermione tentatively. “You know, I was thinking today . . .” She shot a slightly nervous look at Harry and then plunged on, “I was thinking that — maybe the time’s come when we should just — just do it ourselves.”

“Do what ourselves?” said Harry suspiciously, still floating his hand in the essence of murtlap tentacles.

“Well — learn Defense Against the Dark Arts ourselves,” said Hermione.

“Come off it,” groaned Ron. “You want us to do extra work? D’you realize Harry and I are behind on homework again and it’s only the second week?”

“But this is much more important than homework!” said Hermione. Harry and Ron goggled at her.

“I didn’t think there was anything in the universe more important than homework,” said Ron.

“Don’t be silly, of course there is!” said Hermione, and Harry saw, with an ominous feeling, that her face was suddenly alight with the kind of fervor that S.P.E.W. usually inspired in her. “It’s about preparing ourselves, like Harry said in Umbridge’s first lesson, for what’s waiting out there. It’s about making sure we really can defend

ourselves. If we don't learn anything for a whole year —"

"We can't do much by ourselves," said Ron in a defeated voice. "I mean, all right, we can go and look jinxes up in the library and try and practice them, I suppose —"

"No, I agree, we've gone past the stage where we can just learn things out of books," said Hermione. "We need a teacher, a proper one, who can show us how to use the spells and correct us if we're going wrong."

"If you're talking about Lupin . . ." Harry began.

"No, no, I'm not talking about Lupin," said Hermione. "He's too busy with the Order and anyway, the most we could see him is during Hogsmeade weekends and that's not nearly often enough."

"Who, then?" said Harry, frowning at her.

Hermione heaved a very deep sigh.

"Isn't it obvious?" she said. "I'm talking about *you*, Harry."

There was a moment's silence. A light night breeze rattled the windowpanes behind Ron and the fire guttered.

"About me what?" said Harry.

"I'm talking about *you* teaching us Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Harry stared at her. Then he turned to Ron, ready to exchange the exasperated looks they sometimes shared when Hermione elaborated on far-fetched schemes like S.P.E.W. To Harry's consternation, however, Ron did not look exasperated. He was frowning slightly, apparently thinking. Then he said, "That's an idea."

"What's an idea?" said Harry.

"You," said Ron. "Teaching us to do it."

“But . . .”

Harry was grinning now, sure the pair of them were pulling his leg.

“But I’m not a teacher, I can’t —”

“Harry, you’re the best in the year at Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Hermione.

“Me?” said Harry, now grinning more broadly than ever. “No I’m not, you’ve beaten me in every test —”

“Actually, I haven’t,” said Hermione coolly. “You beat me in our third year — the only year we both sat the test and had a teacher who actually knew the subject. But I’m not talking about test results, Harry. Look what you’ve *done!*”

“How d’you mean?”

“You know what, I’m not sure I want someone this stupid teaching me,” Ron said to Hermione, smirking slightly. He turned to Harry. “Let’s think,” he said, pulling a face like Goyle concentrating. “Uh . . . first year — you saved the Stone from You-Know-Who.”

“But that was luck,” said Harry, “that wasn’t skill —”

“Second year,” Ron interrupted, “you killed the basilisk and destroyed Riddle.”

“Yeah, but if Fawkes hadn’t turned up I —”

“Third year,” said Ron, louder still, “you fought off about a hundred dementors at once —”

“You know that was a fluke, if the Time-Turner hadn’t —”

“Last year,” Ron said, almost shouting now, “you fought off You-Know-Who again —”

“Listen to me!” said Harry, almost angrily, because Ron and

Hermione were both smirking now. “Just listen to me, all right? It sounds great when you say it like that, but all that stuff was luck — I didn’t know what I was doing half the time, I didn’t plan any of it, I just did whatever I could think of, and I nearly always had help —”

Ron and Hermione were still smirking and Harry felt his temper rise; he wasn’t even sure why he was feeling so angry.

“Don’t sit there grinning like you know better than I do, I was there, wasn’t I?” he said heatedly. “I know what went on, all right? And I didn’t get through any of that because I was brilliant at Defense Against the Dark Arts, I got through it all because — because help came at the right time, or because I guessed right — but I just blundered through it all, I didn’t have a clue what I was doing — STOP LAUGHING!”

The bowl of murtlap essence fell to the floor and smashed. He became aware that he was on his feet, though he couldn’t remember standing up. Crookshanks streaked away under a sofa; Ron and Hermione’s smiles had vanished.

“You don’t know what it’s like! You — neither of you — you’ve never had to face him, have you? You think it’s just memorizing a bunch of spells and throwing them at him, like you’re in class or something? The whole time you know there’s nothing between you and dying except your own — your own brain or guts or whatever — like you can think straight when you know you’re about a second from being murdered, or tortured, or watching your friends die — they’ve never taught us that in their classes, what it’s like to deal with things like that — and you two sit there acting like I’m a clever little boy to be standing here, alive, like Diggory was stupid, like he

messed up = you just don't get it, that could just as easily have been me, it would have been if Voldemort hadn't needed me ="

"We weren't saying anything like that, mate," said Ron, looking aghast. "We weren't having a go at Diggory, we didn't — you've got the wrong end of the —"

He looked helplessly at Hermione, whose face was stricken.

"Harry," she said timidly, "don't you see? This . . . this is exactly why we need you . . . We need to know what it's r-really like facing him . . . facing V-Voldemort."

It was the first time she had ever said Voldemort's name, and it was this, more than anything else, that calmed Harry. Still breathing hard, he sank back into his chair, becoming aware as he did so that his hand was throbbing horribly again. He wished he had not smashed the bowl of murtlap essence.

"Well . . . think about it," said Hermione quietly. "Please?"

Harry could not think of anything to say. He was feeling ashamed of his outburst already. He nodded, hardly aware of what he was agreeing to.

Hermione stood up.

"Well, I'm off to bed," she said in a voice that was clearly as natural as she could make it. "Erm . . . night."

Ron had gotten to his feet too.

"Coming?" he said awkwardly to Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry. "In . . . in a minute. I'll just clear this up."

He indicated the smashed bowl on the floor. Ron nodded and left.

"*Reparo*," Harry muttered, pointing his wand at the broken pieces of china. They flew back together, good as new, but there was no

returning the murtlap essence to the bowl.

He was suddenly so tired that he was tempted to sink back into his armchair and sleep there, but instead he got to his feet and followed Ron upstairs. His restless night was punctuated once more by dreams of long corridors and locked doors, and he awoke next day with his scar prickling again.

Hoë Ondersoeker by Hogwarts

Hulle het verwag hulle sal Hermien se *Daaglikse Profeet* die volgende dag moet fynkam vir die artikel waarna Percy verwys het. Maar die uil is skaars bo-oor die melkbeker toe Hermien hard na haar asem snak en die koerant platdruk sodat hulle die groot foto van Dolores Umbridge onder die hoofopskrif kan sien. Sy glimlag breed en knip haar oë stadig.

MINISTERIE STREEF NA OPVOEDKUNDIGE HERVORMING DOLORES UMBRIDGE AANGESTEL AS EERSTE HOË ONDERSOEKER

“Umbridge – ‘Hoë ondersoeker?’” sê Harry bekommerd en sy half-geëte sny roosterbrood glip uit sy vingers. “Wat beteken dit?”

Hermien lees hardop.

“In ’n verrassende skuif het die Ministerie vir Towerkuns laas nag nuwe wetgewing aanvaar, wat aan hulle ’n ongekende vlak van beheer by Hogwarts Skool vir Heksery en Towerkuns verleen.

“Die Minister is reeds ’n geruime tyd toenemend bekommerd oor die toedrag van sake by Hogwarts,’ het die Minister se junior assistent, Percy Weasley, gesê. ‘Dit is in reaksie op klagtes deur bekommerde ouers wat voel die skool beweeg in ’n rigting wat hulle nie kan goedkeur nie.’

“Dit is nie die eerste keer dat die Minister, Cornelius Broddelwerk, nuwe wette gebruik om verbeterings by die towerskool te bewerkstellig nie. So onlangs soos 30 Augustus is Opvoedkundige Dekreet Nommer Twee-en-twintig uitgevaardig om te verseker dat, indien die huidige skoolhoof nie in staat is om ’n kandidaat vir ’n onderwyspos te voorsien nie, die Ministerie ’n geskikte persoon kan aanstel.

“Dit is hoe Dolores Umbridge as onderwyser by Hogwarts aangestel is,’ het Weasley laas nag gesê. ‘Dompeldorius kon nie iemand kry nie, dus het die Ministerie Umbridge aangestel, en sy was uit die aard van die saak ’n onmiddellike sukses’ –”

"Sy's WAT?" sê Harry hard.

"Wag, daar's nog," sê Hermien grimmig.

"– 'onmiddellike sukses, het 'n ommekeer in die onderrig van Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste bewerkstellig en die Minister voorsien van waardevolle inligting oor wat werklik by Hogwarts aan die gang is.'

"Dit is laasgenoemde funksie wat die Ministerie nou formaliseer met die aanvaarding van Opvoedkundige Dekreet Nommer Drie-en-twintig, waarmee die nuwe posisie van Hoë Ondersoeker ingestel is.

"Dit is 'n opwindende nuwe fase in die Minister se plan om dit wat sommige die dalende standarde by Hogwarts noem, te takel,' sê Weasley. 'Die Ondersoeker sal die mag hê om haar medeopvoedkundiges te inspekteer en om seker te maak dat hulle op standaard is. Professor Umbridge is hierdie pos aangebied benewens haar onderwyspos en ons is baie gelukkig dat sy dit aanvaar het.'

"Die nuwe rigting wat die Ministerie inslaan, is met groot entoesiasme deur ouers van Hogwarts-studente ontvang.

"'Ek voel baie rustiger in my gemoed nou dat ek weet dat Dompeldorius op 'n regverdige en billike wyse geëvalueer gaan word,' het meneer Lucius Malfoy, 41, gisteraand by sy Wiltshire-herehuis gesê. 'Baie van ons wat ons kinders se beste belange op die hart dra, bekommer ons reeds 'n paar jaar al oor sommige van Dompeldorius se eksentrieke besluite, en ons is bly dat die Ministerie 'n ogie oor die situasie hou.'

"Onder hierdie eksentrieke besluite val twyfelagtige personeel-aanstellings, soos reeds vroeër berig. Dit sluit in die indiensneming van die weerwolf Remus Lupin, die halfreus Rubeus Hagrid en die bedrieglike gewese Auror 'Maloog' Moodie.

"Gerugte is in omloop dat Albus Dompeldorius, voorheen Groot Kokedoor van die Internasionale Konfederasie vir Towenaars en Opperste Goëlaar van die Towenaarshoërhof, nie meer in staat is om die uitsoekskool Hogwarts te bestuur nie.

"'Ek dink die aanstelling van 'n Ondersoeker is die eerste stap om te verseker dat Hogwarts 'n skoolhoof het wat ons vertrouwe waardig is,' het 'n vertroueling van die Ministerie gisteraand gesê.

"Twee lede van die Towenaarshoërhof, Griselda Marchbanks en Tiberius Ogden, het bedank uit protes teen die instelling van die pos van Hoë Ondersoeker by Hogwarts.

"'Hogwarts is 'n skool, nie 'n buitepos van Cornelius Broddelwerk se kantoor nie,' het Madame Marchbanks gesê. 'Dis 'n verdere onsmaaklike poging om Albus Dompeldorius te diskrediteer.'

"(Vir 'n volledige verslag van Madame Marchbanks se beweerde skakeling met ondermynende gnoomgroepe, sien bladsy sewentien.)"

Na Hermien klaar gelees het, kyk sy kyk oor die tafel na Harry en Ron.

“Wel, nou weet ons hoe Umbridge by ons beland het! Broddelwerk het hierdie ‘Opvoedkundige Dekreet’ uitgevaardig en haar aan ons opgedwing! En nou’t hy haar die mag gegee om die ander onderwysers te inspekteer!” Sy haal vinnig asem en haar oë blink helder. “Ek kan dit nie glo nie. Dis *malligheid!*”

“Ek stem saam,” sê Harry. Hy kyk na sy regterhand wat die tafelblad vasklem en sien die dowwe wit buitelyne van die woorde wat Umbridge hom in sy vel laat sny het.

Maar Ron glimlag breed.

“Wat?” sê Harry en Hermien gelyk en staar na hom.

“Ek kan nie wag dat McGonagall geïnspekteer word nie,” sê Ron in sy skik. “Umbridge sal nie weet wat haar getref het nie.”

Hermien spring op. “Wel, kom ons gaan, netnou inspekteer sy Binns se klas en ons wil nie laat wees nie . . .”

Maar professor Umbridge is nie daar om hul Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns-klas, wat net so saai soos die vorige Maandag s’n is, te inspekteer nie. Sy is ook nie in Snerp se kerker toe hulle vir dubbele Towerdrankies opdaag en Harry sy opstel oor maanstene terugkry met ’n groot swart “P” in die boonste hoek nie.

“Ek het vir julle die punt gegee wat julle sou kry as dit ’n UIL-eksamen was,” sê Snerp met ’n grynsag terwyl hy hulle huiswerk teruggee. “Dit sal julle ’n goeie idee gee van wat julle in die eksamen kan verwag.”

Hy gaan staan voor in die klas en kyk na hulle.

“Die algemene standaard van die huiswerk was treurig. Die meeste van julle sou gedruip het as dit ’n eksamen was. Ek verwag dat julle meer moeite met hierdie week se opstel oor verskillende soorte teengiwwe sal doen – óf al die patete met P’s sal detensie doen.”

Hy grinnik toe Malfoy giggel en hard fluister: “So party mense het ’n P gekry? Ha!”

Harry kom agter dat Hermien sy punt probeer sien. Hy steek sy opstel vinnig in sy sak. Sulke inligting sal hy eerder vir homself hou.

Hy is nie van plan om weer vir Snerp rede te gee om hom te laat druipe nie en lees en herlees elke instruksie op die bord ten minste drie keer voor hy dit uitvoer. Sy Versterkingsoplossing is nou wel nie die presiese helder turkoois van Hermien s’n nie, maar dis ook nie pienk soos Neville s’n nie, en hy voel baie verlig en uitdagend toe hy sy fles aan die einde van die klas op Snerp se lesse-naar neersit.

"Wel, dit was darem nie so erg soos verlede week nie," sê Hermien toe hulle die kerker se trappe uitklim vir middagete in die Groot Saal. "En die huiswerk was ook nie te erg nie, nè."

Toe Harry en Ron nie antwoord nie, gaan sy voort: "Ek bedoel, dis nie dat ek verwag om volpunte te kry nie, nie as hy volgens UIL-standaarde merk nie, maar 'n slaagsyfer is in hierdie stadium nogal iets, of hoe?"

Harry maak 'n niksseggende geluid agter in sy keel.

"Natuurlik kan daar baie tussen nou en die eksamen gebeur, daar's baie tyd om te verbeter, maar die punte wat ons nou kry, vorm 'n soort basis, iets waarop ons kan bou."

Hulle gaan sit saam by die Griffindor-tafel.

"Natuurlik sou ek *ontsettend* bly gewees het as ek 'n U gekry het –"

"Hermien," sê Ron skerp, "as jy wil weet wat ons gekry het, vra."

"Ek wil nie – ek probeer regtig nie – wel, as julle nie wil sê nie –"

"Ek het 'n S," sê Ron en skep vir hom sop in. "Tevrede?"

"Wel, dis niks om voor skaam te wees nie," sê Fred, wat pas saam met George en Lee Jordaan opgedaag het en aan Harry se regterkant gaan sit. "Daar's niks verkeerd met 'n goeie ou S nie."

"Maar," sê Hermien, "ek dag S staan vir . . ."

"Swak, ja," sê Lee Jordaan. "Maar dis minstens beter as P – Pateties."

Harry voel hoe sy gesig warm word en maak of hy aan sy broodrolletjie verstik. Toe hy klaar gehoes het, is Hermien tot sy spyt nog steeds met die UIL-punte besig.

"Die toppunt U staan vir Uitstekend, dan's daar A vir –"

"Nee, O," verbeter George, "vir Oortref Verwagtings. Ek het nog altyd gedink ek en Fred moes vir alles O's gekry het. Ons oortref alle verwagtings net deur vir die eksamen op te daag."

Almal lag behalwe Hermien, wat voortploeter: "Ná O is dit A vir Aanvaarbaar, en dis die laaste slaagsyfer, nè?"

"Jip," sê Fred, dompel 'n rolletjie in sy sop en prop dit heel in sy mond.

"Dan kry jy S vir Swak –" Ron lig albei sy arms bo sy kop en juig kamma, "en P vir Pateties."

"En dan is daar T," sê George.

"T?" Hermien lyk geskok. "Waarvoor staan dit?"

"Trol," grinnik George.

Harry lag weer, hoewel hy nie weet of George 'n grap maak of nie. Hy probeer dink hoe hy dit vir Hermien sal wegsteek as hy T's vir al sy Uille moet kry en besluit dadelik om van nou af baie harder te werk.

"Het julle al 'n inspeksieles gehad?" vra Fred.

"Nee," sê Hermien dadelik. "Het julle?"

"Net voor middagete," sê George. "Towerspreuke."

"Hoe was dit?" vra Harry en Hermien gelyk.

Fred haal sy skouers op.

"Nie so erg nie. Umbridge het in die hoek gesit en notas op 'n aanknipbord gemaak. Julle weet hoe Flickerpitt is, hy't haar soos 'n gas behandel, dit het nie gelyk of sy hom pla nie. Sy't nie juis iets gesê nie. Vir Alicia 'n paar vrae gevra oor hoe die lesse gewoonlik is en Alicia het gesê dis baie goed en dit was al."

"Ek kan nie sien dat hulle vir ou Flickerpitt sal uitskop nie," sê George, "almal kom gewoonlik deur."

"Wie't julle vanmiddag?" vra Fred vir Harry.

"Trelawney –"

"'n T, laat ek jou vertel."

"– en Umbridge self."

"Wel, wees 'n soet seun en betuël jou humeur by Umbridge," sê George. "Angelina sal mal gaan as jy nog 'n Kwiddiek-oefening mis."

Maar Harry hoef nie te wag vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste om vir professor Umbridge te sien nie. Hy sit agter in die skemer Waarsêery-klaskamer en haal sy droomdagboek uit toe Ron hom in die ribbes pomp. Hy kyk om en sien hoe professor Umbridge deur die valdeur klim. Die klas, wat tot nou toe vrolik gesels het, word dadelik stil. Die skielike stilte laat professor Trelawney, wat besig was om eksemplare van *Die Droomorakel* uit te deel, omkyk.

"Goeiemiddag, professor Trelawney," sê professor Umbridge en glimlag breed. "Ek neem aan jy't my nota gekry? Met die tyd en datum van jou inspeksie?"

Professor Trelawney knik kortaf en lyk omgekrap. Sy draai haar rug op professor Umbridge en gaan voort om die boeke uit te deel. Professor Umbridge glimlag nog steeds terwyl sy 'n leunstoel aan die rug nader trek tot net agter professor Trelawney se stoel. Sy gaan sit, haal haar aanknipbord uit haar geblomde sak en kyk vol verwagting op, gereed vir die klas om te begin.

Professor Trelawney trek haar sjaals met bewende hande stywer om haar skouers en kyk deur haar sterk vergrootglaslense na die klas.

"Ons sal vandag voortgaan met ons studie van profetiese drome." Sy probeer duidelik om op haar gewone mistieke manier te praat, maar haar stem bewe effens. "Verdeel in pare en interpreteer mekaar se nuutste nagvisioene met behulp van die *Orakel*."

Dit lyk asof sy na haar stoel wil swiep, maar toe sy sien waar professor Umbridge sit, draai sy links na Parvati en Hildegard, wat reeds Parvati se jongste droom entoesiasies bespreek.

Harry maak sy *Droomorakel* oop terwyl hy vir Umbridge skelm dophou. Sy skryf reeds op haar aanknipbord. Ná 'n paar minute staan sy op, volg Trelawney deur die vertrek en luister na haar gesprekke met die studente. Sy vra hier en daar 'n vraag.

Harry laat sak sy kop vinnig oor sy boek.

“Dink gou aan 'n droom,” sê hy vir Ron, “ingeval die ou padda hierheen kom.”

“Ek het laas keer,” kla Ron. “Dis jou beurt, vertel jy een.”

“Jis, ek weet nie . . .” sê Harry wanhopig. Hy dink nie hy het die afgelope paar nagte hoegenaamd gedroom nie. “Kom ons speel ek het gedroom . . . dat ek vir Snerp in my hekseketel verdrink. Ja, dit klink goed . . .”

Ron giggel toe hy sy *Droomorakel* oopslaan.

“Oukei, ons moet jou ouderdom by die datum van die droom tel, die aantal letters in die onderwerp . . . is dit nou ‘verdrink’ of ‘hekseketel’ of ‘Snerp’?”

“Dit maak nie saak nie, kies enigeen,” sê Harry en waag dit om oor sy skouer te kyk. Professor Umbridge staan langs professor Trelawney. Sy maak notas terwyl die Waarsêery-onderwyser vir Neville oor sy droomdagboek uitvra.

“Op watter nag het jy dit nou weer gedroom?” vra Ron, verdiep in die berekenings.

“Ek weet nie, laas nag, net wanneer jy wil,” sê Harry, wat probeer hoor wat Umbridge vir professor Trelawney sê. Hulle is nou net een tafel weg van hom en Ron. Professor Umbridge skryf nogmaals op haar aanknipbord en professor Trelawney lyk heeltemal van stryk gebring.

“Goed.” Professor Umbridge kyk na professor Trelawney. “Jy is al vir hoe lank in dié pos?”

Professor Trelawney kyk fronsend na haar. Haar arms is gekruis en haar skouers buig vorentoe asof sy haarself op dié manier teen die onwaardigheid van die inspeksie wil beskerm. Sy bly 'n rukkie stil. Maar sy besef skynbaar dat die vraag nie só aanstootlik is dat sy dit sommer net kan ignoreer nie. “Amper sestien jaar,” antwoord sy stuurs.

“Nogal lank,” sê professor Umbridge en skryf iets op haar aanknipbord. “En professor Dompeldorius het jou aangestel?”

“Dis reg,” sê professor Trelawney kortaf.

Professor Umbridge maak nog 'n nota.

“En jy is die agter-agter-kleindogter van die gevierde Siener Cassandra Trelawney?”

“Ja,” sê professor Trelawney en lig haar ken ’n aksie hoër. Nog ’n nota op die aanknipbord.

“Maar ek dink – verskoon my as ek verkeerd is – sedert Cassandra is jy die eerste een in die familie wat gesigte sien?”

“Hierdie gawes slaan dikwels – hm – drie geslagte oor,” sê professor Trelawney.

Professor Umbridge se padda-agtige glimlag verbreed.

“Natuurlik,” sê sy soet en maak nog ’n nota. “Wel, kan jy gou vir my iets voorspel?” Sy glimlag en kyk vraend op.

Professor Trelawney verstyf asof sy haar ore nie kan glo nie. “Ek verstaan nie,” sê sy en gryp-gryp rukkerig na die sjaal om haar dun nekke.

“Ek wil hê jy moet iets vir my voorspel,” sê professor Umbridge baie duidelik.

Harry en Ron is nie die enigste mense wat nou skelm van agter hul boeke loer en luister nie. Die meeste leerlinge staar stom van verbasing terwyl professor Trelawney haar met klingelende krale en armbande tot haar volle lengte ophys.

“Die Innerlike Oog Sien nie op bevel nie!” sê sy ontstig.

“Ek sien,” sê professor Umbridge en maak nog ’n nota op haar aanknipbord.

“Ek – maar – maar . . . wag!” sê professor Trelawney skielik in ’n poging tot haar gewone eteriese stem, hoewel sy so bewoende van woede dat die mistieke effek ietwat versteur word. “Ek . . . ek dink ek sien tog iets . . . iets wat jou aangaan . . . ja, ek voel iets . . . iets donkers . . . groot gevaar . . .”

Sy wys met ’n bewende vinger na professor Umbridge, wat nog steeds uitdrukkingloos glimlag, haar wenkbroue gelig.

“Ek is bevrees . . . ek is bevrees jy is in groot gevaar!” voltooi professor Trelawney dramaties.

Daar is ’n stilte. Professor Umbridge staar na professor Trelawney.

“Goed,” sê sy sag en maak ’n nota op die aanknipbord. “Wel, as dit regtig al is wat jy kan doen . . .”

Sy draai om en professor Trelawney bly net daar staan. Haar borskas dein vinnig op en neer. Harry vang Ron se oog. Hy weet Ron voel nes hy: hulle weet goed professor Trelawney is ’n ou bedrieër, maar hulle haat Umbridge só dat hulle eerder Trelawney se kant kies – tot sy ’n paar sekondes later op hulle afpyl.

“Wel?” sê sy en klap haar lang vingers ongewoon flink onder Harry se neus. “Laat ek asseblief sien hoe jou droomdagboek lyk.”

En teen die tyd dat sy Harry se drome kliphard uitgelê het (elkeen voorspel sy grusame en vroeë dood, selfs wanneer hy net droom hy eet pap), het hy baie minder simpatie vir haar. Professor Umbridge staan die hele tyd net 'n paar tree weg en maak notas op haar aanknipbord. Toe die klok lui, klim sy eerste teen die silwer leer af en wag hulle in toe hulle tien minute later by haar klaskamer opdaag vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste.

Sy neurie glimlaggend by haarself toe hulle instap. Terwyl hulle hul eksemplare van *Die Teorie van die Verdedigingstoorkuns* uithaal, vertel Harry en Ron gou vir Hermien, wat Rekenmatiek gehad het, wat in Waarsêery gebeur het. Maar professor Umbridge maak hulle stil voor Hermien verder kan uitvra.

"Towerstawwe weg," sê sy steeds glimlaggend en diegene wat optimisties genoeg was om hul towerstawwe uit te haal, sit dit weer gedwee weg. "Ons het hoofstuk een reeds tydens die vorige les voltooi. Blaai nou na bladsy negentien en lees hoofstuk twee: 'Algemene verdedigingsteorieë en hul herkoms'. Dis nie nodig om te praat nie."

Sy glimlag steeds selfvoldaan toe sy agter haar lessenaar gaan sit. Die klas sug hoorbaar en blaai na bladsy negentien. Harry wonder bedruk of daar genoeg hoofstukke is om hulle die hele jaar besig te hou met lees en is op die punt om by die inhoud te kyk toe Hermien se hand opgaan.

Professor Umbridge het dit ook gesien. Wat meer is, dit lyk of sy 'n strategie vir so iets uitgewerk het. Sy maak nie weer of sy nie vir Hermien sien nie, maar staan op en stap om die voorste ry banke tot hulle regoor mekaar is. Toe buk sy af en fluister sodat die res van die klas nie kan hoor nie: "Wat is dit nou weer, mejuffrou La Grange?"

"Ek het hoofstuk twee reeds gelees," sê Hermien.

"Wel, gaan dan voort met hoofstuk drie."

"Ek het dit ook al gelees. Ek het die hele boek gelees."

Professor Umbridge se oë knipper, maar sy ruk haar feitlik onmiddellik reg. "Goed, dan behoort jy vir my te kan vertel wat Sluiphard in hoofstuk vyftien oor teenvloeke sê."

"Hy reken teenvloeke is nie 'n gepaste benaming nie," sê Hermien pronk. "Hy sê 'teenvloeke' is net 'n naam wat mense gebruik sodat hul vloeke meer aanvaarbaar klink."

Professor Umbridge se wenkbroue lig effens en Harry kan sien dat sy teen haar sin beïndruk is.

"Maar ek stem nie saam nie," vervolg Hermien.

Professor Umbridge se wenkbroue styg nog hoër en haar blik word koud.

"Jy stem nie saam nie?" herhaal sy.

"Ja," sê Hermien. Hoewel Umbridge fluister, praat Hermien in 'n helder stem, sodat die hele klas teen hierdie tyd luister. "Ek is bevrees meneer Sluiphard hou nie van vloeke nie. Maar ek dink hulle is baie nuttig vir verdediging."

"O, jy dink so?" sê professor Umbridge. Sy vergeet om te fluister en staan regop. "Wel, ek is bevrees dis meneer Sluiphard se mening en nie joune nie wat in hierdie klaskamer tel, juffrou La Grange."

"Maar –" begin Hermien.

"Dis genoeg," sê professor Umbridge. Sy stap na die voorkant van die klas, maar lyk nie meer so selfversekerd soos aan die begin van die les nie. "Mejuffrou La Grange, ek trek vyf punte van Griffindor af."

Daar is 'n uitbarsting van stemme.

"Hoekom?" vra Harry vies.

"Bly jy hier uit!" fluister Hermien dringend.

"Omdat julle my klas met sinnelose opmerkings onderbreek," sê professor Umbridge gladweg. "Ek is hier om julle te onderrig volgens 'n Ministerie-goedgekeurde metode wat nie ruimte laat vir studente om hul menings te lug oor sake wat hulle glad nie verstaan nie. Dalk het julle vorige onderwysers julle meer vryhede gegee, maar nie een van hulle – behalwe dalk professor Quirrell, wat hom minstens beperk het tot onderwerpe wat vir jul ouderdomsgroep geskik is – sou 'n inspeksie deur die Ministerie geslaag het nie –"

"Ja, Quirrel was 'n goeie onderwyser," sê Harry hard, "net jammer die heer Woldemort het agter by sy kop uitgesteek."

Hierdie aanmerking word gevolg deur een van die ergste stiltes wat Harry nog beleef het. Toe –

"Ek dink nog 'n week se detensie sal jou goed doen, meneer Potter," sê Umbridge slu.

Die snye op Harry se hand is nog nie heeltemal gesond nie en bloei weer die volgende oggend. Hy het nie een keer tydens die detensie gekla nie, hy sal Umbridge nie daardie bevrediging gee nie. Hy het *Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie* oor en oor geskryf sonder om 'n geluid te maak en die snye het met elke letter dieper geword.

Die ergste deel van die tweede week se detensie is Angelina se reaksie – nes George voorspel het. Sy loop hom trompop toe hy die Dinsdagoggend vir ontbyt by die Groot Saal opdaag en skree so hard dat professor McGonagall van die personeeltafel af na hulle toe swiep.

"Juffrou Johnson, hoe *durf* jy so 'n kabaal in die Groot Saal maak! Vyf punte van Griffindor!"

“Maar Professor – hy doen weer detensie –”

“Wat hoor ek, Potter?” sê professor McGonagall skerp en kyk na Harry. “Detensie? By wie?”

“Professor Umbridge,” prewel Harry en vermy professor McGonagall se kraalogies in die vierkantige brilraam.

“Wil jy vir my sê,” haar stem sak sodat die nuuskierige Raweklouers agter haar hulle nie kan hoor nie, “dat jy nadat ek jou verlede Maandag gewaarsku het, weer jou humeur in professor Umbridge se klas verloor het?”

“Ja,” mompel Harry vir die vloer.

“Potter, jy moet jouself regruk! Jy gaan ernstige probleme optel! Nog vyf punte van Griffindor!”

“Maar – wat –? Professor, nee!” sê Harry, woedend oor die onreg. “Ek word reeds deur haar gestraf, ek kan nie nog punte ook verloor nie!”

“Dit lyk nie of detensie enige uitwerking op jou het nie!” sê professor McGonagall skerp. “Nie nog ’n woord van jou nie, Potter! En wat jou betref, juffrou Johnson, jy sal jou geskree tot die Kwiddiekveld beperk as jy nie die kapteinskap wil verloor nie!”

Professor McGonagall stap terug na die personeeltafel. Angelina kyk minagtend na Harry voor sy vinnig wegstap. Harry slinger hom op die bank langs Ron neer.

“Sy trek punte van Griffindor af omdat ek my hand elke nag moet oopsny! Dis nou vir jou regverdigheid.”

“Ek weet, pël,” sê Ron simpatiek. Hy skep spek op Harry se bord. “Sy’s buite orde.”

Hermien ritsel egter net die bladsye van haar *Daaglikse Profeet* en sê niks.

“Jy dink McGonagall is reg, nè?” sê Harry ergerlik vir Cornelius Broddelwerk se foto voor Hermien se gesig.

“Ek wens sy het nie vir jou punte afgetrek nie, maar ek dink sy’s reg as sy jou waarsku om nie vir Umbridge kwaad te maak nie,” sê Hermien se stem terwyl Broddelwerk wild op die voorblad beduie, duidelik besig met die een of ander toespraak.

Harry praat nie met Hermien in die Towerspreuk-klas nie, maar toe hulle die Transfigurasie-klas binnestap, vergeet hy skoon om nog vir haar kwaad te wees. Professor Umbridge en haar aanknipbord sit in die hoek en dit dryf alles wat aan die ontbyttafel gebeur het uit sy kop.

“Uitstekend,” fluister Ron toe hulle op hul gewone plekke gaan sit. “Kom ons kyk hoe Umbridge haar moses teëkom.”

Professor McGonagall stap die vertrek binne sonder om enige

teken te gee dat sy van professor Umbridge se teenwoordigheid weet.

“Dis genoeg,” sê sy en hulle word onmiddellik stil. “Meneer Floris, kom asseblief hier en gee die huiswerk terug – juffrou Braun, neem hierdie doos vol muise – moenie verspot wees nie, kind, hulle sal niks aan jou doen nie – gee vir elke student een –”

“Hem, hem,” sê professor Umbridge met dieselfde simpel hoësie waarmee sy die eerste aand vir Dompeldorius in die rede geval het. Professor McGonagall ignoreer haar. Septimus gee Harry se opstel vir hom aan. Harry neem dit sonder om na hom te kyk en sien tot sy verligting dat hy 'n A het.

“Nou goed, luister asseblief mooi – Dean Thomas, as jy dit weer aan daardie muis doen, kry jy detensie – die meeste van julle het al julle slakke laat Verdwyn, en selfs diegene wat 'n stuk dop oorgehou het, weet min of meer hoe die towerspreuk werk. Vandag gaan ons –”

“Hem, hem,” sê professor Umbridge.

“Ja?” Professor McGonagall swaai om, haar wenkbroue so styf teen mekaar dat hulle 'n lang kwaai streep vorm.

“Ek het gewonder, professor, of jy my nota ontvang het met die datum en tyd van die inspek –”

“Dis tog duidelik dat ek dit gekry het, anders sou ek jou gevra het wat jy in my klaskamer soek,” sê professor McGonagall en draai haar rug beslis op professor Umbridge. 'n Hele paar studente kyk na mekaar en lyk in hulle noppies. “Soos ek gesê het, vandag gaan ons die heelwat moeiliker Verdwyning van muise oefen. Nou, die Verdwyntowerspreuk –”

“Hem, hem.”

“Ek wonder,” sê professor McGonagall kil en draai verwoed na professor Umbridge, “hoe jy verwag om 'n idee van my onderrigmetodes te kry as jy my gedung in die rede val? Ek laat nie gewoonlik geselsery toe wanneer ek praat nie.”

Professor Umbridge lyk of sy pas deur die gesig geklap is. Sy sê niks, maar stryk die perkament op haar aanknipbord plat en begin vinnig skryf.

Professor McGonagall lyk glad nie bekommerd toe sy voortgaan met die les nie.

“Soos ek gesê het, die Verdwyntowerspreuk raak moeiliker hoe meer kompleks die dier is wat moet Verdwyn. Die slak, 'n weekdier, is nie juis 'n groot uitdaging nie. Die muis, 'n soogdier, is heelwat moeiliker. Dis nie die soort towerkuns wat jy kan doen terwyl jou gedagtes by jou aandete is nie. Goed – julle ken die spreuk, kom ons kyk wat julle regkry

“Hoe kan sy met my staan en raas oor ek my humeur met Umbridge verloor?” mompel Harry vir Ron, maar hy glimlag. Hy is nie meer kwaad vir professor McGonagall nie.

Professor Umbridge stap nie agter professor McGonagall aan soos sy met professor Trelawney gemaak het nie, moontlik omdat sy besef McGonagall sal dit nie toelaat nie. Maar sy maak baie meer notas in haar hoekie, en toe professor McGonagall uiteindelik vir die klas sê om hul goed weg te pak, kom sy orent met ’n grimmige uitdrukking op haar gesig.

“Hm, dis seker ’n begin.” Ron hou ’n lang, kriewelende muisstert in die lug en laat val dit in die doos wat Hildegard voor hom hou.

Toe hulle begin uitstap, sien Harry dat professor Umbridge na die onderwyser se lessenaar loop. Hy stamp aan Ron, wat op sy beurt aan Hermien stamp en hulle stap aspris stadiger om af te luister.

“Hoe lank gee jy al onderwys by Hogwarts?” vra professor Umbridge.

“Nege-en-dertig jaar in Desember,” sê professor McGonagall kortaf en klap haar tas toe.

Professor Umbridge maak ’n nota. “Goed dan, jy sal die uitslag van jou inspeksie oor tien dae kry.”

“Ek kan nie wag nie,” sê professor McGonagall koud en onverskillig en stap na die deur. “Opskud, julle drie,” jaag sy vir Harry, Ron en Hermien aan.

Harry glimlag effens vir haar en hy kan sweer sy het teruggeglimlag.

Hy het gedink hy sal eers weer vir Umbridge daardie aand tydens detensie sien, maar hy is verkeerd. Toe hulle oor die grasperk na die Woud stap vir Versorging van Magiese Creature, staan sy met haar aanknipbord langs professor Growweblaar.

“Jy gee nie altyd hier klas nie, is dit korrek?” hoor Harry haar vra toe hulle by die opslaantafel kom waarop die gevange takkruipers soos lewende stokkies rondskarrel op soek na houtluise.

“Heeltemal korrek,” sê professor Growweblaar. Sy hou haar hande agter haar rug en wip op en af op die balle van haar voete. “Ek is ’n plaasvervanger vir professor Hagrid.”

Harry kyk bekommerd na Ron en Hermien. Malfoy fluister iets vir Krabbe en Goliat. Harry weet Malfoy sal dit baie geniet om ’n lid van die Ministerie met stories oor Hagrid te vergas.

“Hmm,” sê professor Umbridge en haar stem sak, hoewel Harry haar nog steeds duidelik kan hoor. “Ek wonder – die skoolhoof is vreemd onwillig om vir my inligting oor die saak te gee – kan jy vir my sê hoekom professor Hagrid so lank met verlof is?”

Harry sien hoe Malfoy gretig na Umbridge en Growweblaar kyk.

"Jammer, ek weet nie," sê professor Growweblaar flink. "Weet niks meer as jy nie. Het 'n uil van Dompeldorius gekry, wil ek 'n paar weke klas gee? Ek het aanvaar. Dis al wat ek weet. Wel... sal ek begin?"

"Ja, asseblief," sê professor Umbridge en skryf iets op haar aanknipbord.

Umbridge gebruik hierdie keer 'n ander metode. Sy dwaal tussen die studente rond terwyl sy hulle oor magiese kreature uitvra. Die meeste mense gee goeie antwoorde en Harry voel effens beter. Ten minste laat die klas Hagrid nie in die steek nie.

"In die geheel gesien," sê professor Umbridge vir professor Growweblaar nadat sy vir Dean Thomas lank ondervra het, "hoe vind jy, 'n tydelike lid van die personeel – 'n objektiewe buitestander – hoe vind jy Hogwarts? Voel jy jy kry genoeg ondersteuning van die skool se bestuur?"

"O ja, Dompeldorius is uitstekend," sê professor Growweblaar hartlik. "Ja, ek is baie tevrede met die manier waarop dinge gedoen word, inderdaad baie tevrede."

Umbridge lyk hoflik dog ongelowig. Sy maak 'n klein nota op haar aanknipbord en gaan voort: "En wat beplan jy om vanjaar met hierdie klas te doen – dis nou indien professor Hagrid nie terugkom nie?"

"O, ek sal die diere wat gewoonlik in die UIL voorkom met hulle behandel. Daar's nie veel oor nie. Hulle het eenhorings en niflers reeds gedoen. Ek het gedink ons sal porlokke en kniesels doen en seker maak dat hulle weet hoe kroepe en knarle lyk..."

"Wel, dit lyk of jy darem weet wat jy doen," sê professor Umbridge en maak 'n duidelike regmerk op haar aanknipbord. Harry hou nie van die klem wat sy op "jy" geplaas het nie en hy hou nog minder daarvan toe sy die volgende vraag aan Goliat rig. "Ek hoor daar was beserings in hierdie klas?"

Goliat lag dommerig.

"Dit was ek," antwoord Malfoy vinnig. "'n Hippogrief het my aan-geval."

"'n Hippogrief?" sê professor Umbridge en skryf woes.

"Net omdat hy te onnosel was om na Hagrid te luister," sê Harry verontwaardig.

Sowel Ron as Hermien kreun. Professor Umbridge draai haar kop stadig na Harry.

"Ek dink nog een aand se detensie," sê sy sag. "Wel, baie dankie, professor Growweblaar, ek reken ek het alles wat ek nodig het. Jy sal die uitslag van die inspeksie oor tien dae kry."

“Gaaf,” sê professor Growweblaar, en professor Umbridge stap oor die grasperk weg na die kasteel.

Dis amper middernag toe Harry uit Umbridge se kantoor kom. Sy hand bloei so kwaai, dit vlek die serp wat hy omgebind het. Hy het verwag dat die geselskamer leeg sal wees wanneer hy daar kom, maar Ron en Hermien sit vir hom en wag. Hy is baie bly om hulle te sien, veral omdat Hermien gewoonlik simpatiek en nie krities is nie.

“Hier,” sê sy angstig en stoot ’n bakkie geel vloeistof na hom, “week jou hand daarin, dis ’n aftreksel van gepekelde murklaptentakels, dit behoort te help.”

Harry druk sy bloeiende seer hand in die bakkie en dit voel onmiddellik beter. Kromskeen draai spinnend om sy bene, spring op sy skoot en maak hom tuis.

“Dankie,” sê hy dankbaar terwyl hy vir Kromskeen met sy linkerhand tussen die ore krap.

“Ek dink nog steeds jy moet gaan kla,” sê Ron.

“Nee,” sê Harry beslis.

“McGonagall sal mal gaan as sy moet weet –”

“Ja, sy sal seker,” sê Harry stroef. “En hoe lank dink jy sal dit vir Umbridge vat om ’n wet te laat maak wat sê dat almal wat oor die Hoë Ondersoeker kla dadelik uitgeskop word?”

Ron maak sy mond oop om teë te kap, maar niks kom uit nie en ná ’n rukkie gaan sy mond weer toe.

“Sy’s ’n aaklige vrou,” sê Hermien in ’n klein stemmetjie. “Aaklig. Weet jy, ek het nou net vir Ron gesê toe jy instap . . . ons moet iets omtrend haar doen.”

“Ek sê gif,” sê Ron bars.

“Nee . . . ek bedoel, iets oor sy so ’n patetiese onderwyser is en ons geen Verdediging by haar leer nie,” sê Hermien.

“Wel, wat kan ons daaraan doen?” Ron gaap groot. “Dis te laat, sy’t klaar die jop. Sy’s hier om te bly, daarvoor het Broddelwerk gesorg.”

“Wel,” sê Hermien huiwerig. “Weet julle, ek het gedink . . .” Sy kyk effens senuagtig na Harry voor sy voortgaan, “ek het gedink dat – dalk het die tyd gekom dat ons – dat ons dit self doen.”

“Wat self doen?” vra Harry agterdogtig, sy hand nog steeds in die bakkie murklapaftreksel.

“Wel – ons moet Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste self leer,” sê Hermien.

“Jy’s lekker laf,” kreun Ron. “Sê jy ons moet ekstra werk doen? Besef jy dat ek en Harry se huiswerk al weer agter is en dis nog maar die tweede week!”

"Maar dis baie belangriker as huiswerk!" sê Hermien.

Harry en Ron staar na haar.

"Ek het nie gedink daar is iets in die heelal wat belangriker as huiswerk is nie," sê Ron.

"Moenie simpel wees nie, natuurlik is daar!" Harry sien met 'n gevoel van dreigende onheil hoe Hermien se gesig skielik verhelder met die soort begeestering wat SPOEG gewoonlik by haar veroorsaak. "Dis soos Harry tydens Umbridge se eerste les gesê het. Dit gaan daaroor dat ons onself voorberei op wat daar buite vir ons wag. Ons moet sorg dat ons onself regtig kan verdedig. As ons vir 'n hele jaar niks leer nie –"

"Daar's nie veel wat ons op ons eie kan doen nie," sê Ron pessimisties. "Ek bedoel, oukei, ons kan seker vloeke en goed in die biblioteek soek en probeer oefen –"

"Nee, ek stem saam, ons is verby die stadium dat ons goed uit boeke kan leer," sê Hermien. "Ons moet 'n onderwyser hê, 'n goeie onderwyser, iemand wat vir ons kan wys hoe om die towerspreuke te gebruik en ons kan reghelp as ons dit verkêerd doen."

"As jy van Lupin praat . . ." begin Harry.

"Nee, nee, ek praat nie van Lupin nie. Hy's te besig met die Orde, en in elk geval, ons sal hom net tydens Hogsmeade-naweke kan sien en dis nie naastenby genoeg nie."

"Wie dan?" vra Harry fronsend.

Hermien sug swaar. "Dis tog maklik. Ek praat van jou, Harry."

Vir 'n oomblik is almal stil. 'n Ligte nagwindjie ratel die ruite agter Ron en die vuur sputter.

"Wat van my?" vra Harry.

"Ek bedoel jy moet vir ons Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste leer."

Harry staar na haar. Dan draai hy na Ron vir die soort moedelse kyk wat hulle soms vir mekaar gee wanneer Hermien oor die een of ander belaglike ding soos SPOEG lories raak.

Tot Harry se verbasing lyk Ron nie moedeloos nie. Hy frons effens asof hy oor Hermien se woorde dink. Toe sê hy: "Dis 'n goeie idee."

"Wat is 'n goeie idee?" sê Harry.

"Jy," sê Ron. "Dat jy vir ons leer."

"Maar . . ." Nou lag Harry. Hy is seker die twee hou hom vir die gek. "Maar ek's nie 'n onderwyser nie, ek kan nie –"

"Harry, jy was die beste in die klas vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste," sê Hermien.

"Ek?" Harry glimlag nog breër. "Nee, ek was nie, jy't my in elke toets uitgestof –"

“Nee, ek het nie,” sê Hermien kil. “Jy’t my in ons derde jaar geklop – die enigste jaar dat ons albei die toets gedoen en ’n onderwyser gehad het wat die vak ken. Maar ek praat nie van toetsuitslae nie, Harry. Dink aan wat jy gedoen het!”

“Wat bedoel jy?”

“Weet jy, ek dink nie dis ’n goeie idee as iemand wat so toe is ons leer nie,” sê Ron vir Hermien en hy grynslag effens.

Hy kyk na Harry. “Kom ons dink,” sê hy en trek ’n gesig soos Goliat as hy konsentreer. “Hm . . . eerste jaar – jy red die towenaar se steen van Jy-Weet-Wie.”

“Maar dit was geluk,” sê Harry, “dit was nie omdat ek goed –”

“Tweede jaar,” val Ron hom in die rede, “jy maak die basilisk dood en speel klaar met Dhoewels.”

“Ja, maar as Fawkes nie gekom het nie, het ek –”

“Derde jaar,” sê Ron nog harder, “jy veg teen omtrent eenhonderd Dementors gelyk –”

“Jy weet dit was geluk – as die Tyddraaier nie –”

“Laas jaar,” Ron skree nou amper, “veg jy weer teen Jy-Weet-Wie –”

“Luister na my!” sê Harry, wat nou begin kwaad word omdat Ron en Hermien albei nou selfvoldaan glimlag. “Luister nou, oukei? Dit klink wonderlik as julle dit so sê, maar al daardie goed was geluk – ek het die meeste van die tyd nie geweet wat ek doen nie. Ek het niks daarvan beplan nie. Ek het net gedoen wat voorkom en omtrent elke keer hulp gehad –”

Ron en Hermien grynslag nog steeds en Harry voel hoe woede in hom opborrel, maar hy is nie seker hoekom nie.

“Moenie daar sit en grinnik asof julle beter weet as ek nie, ek was daar, oukei? Ek weet wat gebeur het. En ek het dit nie reggekry omdat ek briljant in Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste is nie, ek het dit reggekry omdat – omdat ek elke keer op die regte oomblik gehelp is of omdat ek reg geraai het. Maar dit was alles per ongeluk, ek het nie geweet wat ek doen nie – HOU OP LAG!”

Die bakkie murklapaftreksel val op die vloer en breek. Harry besef dat hy opgestaan het, maar hy weet nie wanneer nie. Kromskeen skiet onder ’n bank in en Ron en Hermien se glimlagte verdwyn.

“Julle weet nie hoe dit is nie! Julle – julle het nog nooit teen hom geveg nie! Julle dink ’n mens hoef net ’n paar towerspreuke te leer en na hom te slinger asof jy in die klas is, of so iets! Maar die hele tyd weet jy daar’s niks tussen jou en die dood behalwe jou eie – jou eie brein of moed of wat ook al nie – en jy kan helder dink as jy weet jy gaan enige oomblik vermoor of gemartel word, of as jy moet

“... sien hoe jou vriende doodgaan – hulle het *dit* nooit vir ons in die klas geleer nie, hoe jy so iets moet hanteer – en julle twee sit daar en maak of ek so slim is om lewend hier te staan – asof Diggory dom was en ’n gemors gemaak het! Julle verstaan nie, dit kon net sowel ek gewees het, dit *sou* gewees het as Woldemort my nie nodig gehad het nie –”

“Ons het dit nie so bedoel nie, Harry,” sê Ron geskok. “Ons het nie vir Diggory probeer kap nie, jy verstaan ons verkeerd –”

Hy kyk magteloos na Hermien, wat ook radeloos lyk.

“Harry,” sê sy bedees, “verstaan jy nie? Dis . . . dis presies hoekom ons jou nodig het . . . ons moet weet hoe dit r-regtig is om . . . om teen W-Woldemort . . . te veg.”

Dis die eerste keer dat sy Woldemort se naam gebruik en *dit* meer as enigiets anders laat Harry bedaar. Hy haal nog steeds vinnig asem toe hy in sy stoel terugsak en besef dat sy hand van voor af seer klop. Hy wens hy het nie die bakkie met murklapsous gebreek nie.

“Wel . . . dink daaroor,” sê Hermien sag. “Asseblief?”

Harry kan aan niks dink om te sê nie. Hy is al klaar skaam oor sy uitbarsting. Hy knik instemmend sonder dat hy mooi weet waarvoor.

Hermien staan op.

“Wel, ek gaan slaap,” sê sy en probeer duidelik haar stem so natuurlik moontlik hou. “Hm . . . nag.”

Ron staan ook op.

“Kom jy?” vra hy ongemaklik vir Harry.

“Ja,” sê Harry. “Nou-nou. Ek maak net gou hier skoon.”

Hy wys na die gebreekte bakkie. Ron knik en stap uit.

“*Reparo*,” prewel Harry en wys met sy towerstaf na die stukke porselein. Hulle vlieg bymekaar, so goed soos nuut, maar dis onmoontlik om die murklapaftreksel terug in die bakkie te kry.

Skielik is Harry so moeg dat hy wens hy kan net daar in die leunstoel aan die slaap raak, maar hy dwing homself orent en volg Ron boontoe.

Sy rustelose nagrus word weer eens onderbreek deur drome van lang gange en deure wat gesluit is, en toe hy die volgende oggend wakker word, tintel sy litteken.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



IN THE HOG'S HEAD

Hermione made no mention of Harry giving Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons for two whole weeks after her original suggestion. Harry's detentions with Umbridge were finally over (he doubted whether the words now etched on the back of his hand would ever fade entirely); Ron had had four more Quidditch practices and not been shouted at during the last two; and all three of them had managed to vanish their mice in Transfiguration (Hermione had actually progressed to vanishing kittens), before the subject was broached again, on a wild, blustery evening at the end of September, when the three of them were sitting in the library, looking up potion

ingredients for Snape.

"I was wondering," Hermione said suddenly, "whether you'd thought any more about Defense Against the Dark Arts, Harry."

"Course I have," said Harry grumpily. "Can't forget it, can we, with that hag teaching us —"

"I meant the idea Ron and I had" — Ron cast her an alarmed, threatening kind of look; she frowned at him — "oh, all right, the idea I had, then — about you teaching us."

Harry did not answer at once. He pretended to be perusing a page of *Asiatic Anti-Venoms*, because he did not want to say what was in his mind.

The fact was that he had given the matter a great deal of thought over the past fortnight. Sometimes it seemed an insane idea, just as it had on the night Hermione had proposed it, but at others, he had found himself thinking about the spells that had served him best in his various encounters with Dark creatures and Death Eaters — found himself, in fact, subconsciously planning lessons.

"Well," he said slowly, when he could not pretend to find Asiatic anti-venoms interesting much longer, "yeah, I — I've thought about it a bit."

"And?" said Hermione eagerly.

"I dunno," said Harry, playing for time. He looked up at Ron.

"I thought it was a good idea from the start," said Ron, who seemed keener to join in this conversation now that he was sure that Harry was not going to start shouting again.

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"You did listen to what I said about a load of it being luck, didn't

you?”

“Yes, Harry,” said Hermione gently, “but all the same, there’s no point pretending that you’re not good at Defense Against the Dark Arts, because you are. You were the only person last year who could throw off the Imperius Curse completely, you can produce a Patronus, you can do all sorts of stuff that full-grown wizards can’t, Viktor always said —”

Ron looked around at her so fast he appeared to crick his neck, rubbing it, he said, “Yeah? What did Vicky say?”

“Ho ho,” said Hermione in a bored voice. “He said Harry knew how to do stuff even he didn’t, and he was in the final year at Durmstrang.”

Ron was looking at Hermione suspiciously.

“You’re not still in contact with him, are you?”

“So what if I am?” said Hermione coolly, though her face was a little pink. “I can have a pen pal if I —”

“He didn’t only want to be your pen pal,” said Ron accusingly.

Hermione shook her head exasperatedly and, ignoring Ron, who was continuing to watch her, said to Harry, “Well, what do you think? Will you teach us?”

“Just you and Ron, yeah?”

“Well,” said Hermione, now looking a mite anxious again. “Well . . . now, don’t fly off the handle again, Harry, please. . . . But I really think you ought to teach anyone who wants to learn. I mean, we’re talking about defending ourselves against V-Voldemort — oh, don’t be pathetic, Ron — it doesn’t seem fair if we don’t offer the chance to other people.”

Harry considered this for a moment, then said, “Yeah, but I doubt anyone except you two would want to be taught by me. I’m a nutter, remember?”

“Well, I think you might be surprised how many people would be interested in hearing what you’ve got to say,” said Hermione seriously. “Look,” she leaned toward him; Ron, who was still watching her with a frown on his face, leaned forward to listen too, “you know the first weekend in October’s a Hogsmeade weekend? How would it be if we tell anyone who’s interested to meet us in the village and we can talk it over?”

“Why do we have to do it outside school?” said Ron.

“Because,” said Hermione, returning to the diagram of the Chinese Chomping Cabbage she was copying, “I don’t think Umbridge would be very happy if she found out what we were up to.”

Harry had been looking forward to the weekend trip into Hogsmeade, but there was one thing worrying him. Sirius had maintained a stony silence since he had appeared in the fire at the beginning of September; Harry knew they had made him angry by saying that they did not want him to come — but he still worried from time to time that Sirius might throw caution to the winds and turn up anyway. What were they going to do if the great black dog came bounding up the street toward them in Hogsmeade, perhaps under the nose of Draco Malfoy?

“Well, you can’t blame him for wanting to get out and about,” said Ron, when Harry discussed his fears with him and Hermione. “I mean, he’s been on the run for over two years, hasn’t he, and I know

that can't have been a laugh, but at least he was free, wasn't he? And now he's just shut up all the time with that lunatic elf."

Hermione scowled at Ron, but otherwise ignored the slight on Kreacher.

"The trouble is," she said to Harry, "until V-Voldemort — oh for heaven's *sake*, Ron — comes out into the open, Sirius is going to have to stay hidden, isn't he? I mean, the stupid Ministry isn't going to realize Sirius is innocent until they accept that Dumbledore's been telling the truth about him all along. And once the fools start catching real Death Eaters again it'll be obvious Sirius isn't one . . . I mean, he hasn't got the Mark, for one thing."

"I don't reckon he'd be stupid enough to turn up," said Ron bracingly. "Dumbledore'd go mad if he did and Sirius listens to Dumbledore even if he doesn't like what he hears."

When Harry continued to look worried, Hermione said, "Listen, Ron and I have been sounding out people who we thought might want to learn some proper Defense Against the Dark Arts, and there are a couple who seem interested. We've told them to meet us in Hogsmeade."

"Right," said Harry vaguely, his mind still on Sirius.

"Don't worry, Harry," Hermione said quietly. "You've got enough on your plate without Sirius too."

She was quite right, of course; he was barely keeping up with his homework, though he was doing much better now that he was no longer spending every evening in detention with Umbridge. Ron was even further behind with his work than Harry, because while they both had Quidditch practices twice a week, Ron also had prefect

duties. However, Hermione, who was taking more subjects than either of them, had not only finished all her homework but was also finding time to knit more elf clothes. Harry had to admit that she was getting better; it was now almost always possible to distinguish between the hats and the socks.

The morning of the Hogsmeade visit dawned bright but windy. After breakfast they queued up in front of Filch, who matched their names to the long list of students who had permission from their parents or guardian to visit the village. With a slight pang, Harry remembered that if it hadn't been for Sirius, he would not have been going at all.

When Harry reached Filch, the caretaker gave a great sniff as though trying to detect a whiff of something from Harry. Then he gave a curt nod that set his jowls aquiver again and Harry walked on, out onto the stone steps and the cold, sunlit day.

"Er — why was Filch sniffing you?" asked Ron, as he, Harry, and Hermione set off at a brisk pace down the wide drive to the gates.

"I suppose he was checking for the smell of Dungbombs," said Harry with a small laugh. "I forgot to tell you . . ."

And he recounted the story of sending his letter to Sirius and Filch bursting in seconds later, demanding to see the letter. To his slight surprise, Hermione found this story highly interesting, much more, indeed, than he did himself.

"He said he was tipped off you were ordering Dungbombs? But who had tipped him off?"

"I dunno," said Harry, shrugging. "Maybe Malfoy, he'd think it was a laugh."

They walked between the tall stone pillars topped with winged boars and turned left onto the road into the village, the wind whipping their hair into their eyes.

“Malfoy?” said Hermione, very skeptically. “Well . . . yes . . . maybe . . .”

And she remained deep in thought all the way into the outskirts of Hogsmeade.

“Where are we going anyway?” Harry asked. “The Three Broomsticks?”

“Oh — no,” said Hermione, coming out of her reverie, “no, it’s always packed and really noisy. I’ve told the others to meet us in the Hog’s Head, that other pub, you know the one, it’s not on the main road. I think it’s a bit . . . you know . . . *dodgy* . . . but students don’t normally go in there, so I don’t think we’ll be overheard.”

They walked down the main street past Zonko’s Joke Shop, where they were unsurprised to see Fred, George, and Lee Jordan, past the post office, from which owls issued at regular intervals, and turned up a side street at the top of which stood a small inn. A battered wooden sign hung from a rusty bracket over the door, with a picture upon it of a wild boar’s severed head leaking blood onto the white cloth around it. The sign creaked in the wind as they approached. All three of them hesitated outside the door.

“Well, come on,” said Hermione slightly nervously. Harry led the way inside.

It was not at all like the Three Broomsticks, whose large bar gave an impression of gleaming warmth and cleanliness. The Hog’s Head bar comprised one small, dingy, and very dirty room that smelled

strongly of something that might have been goats. The bay windows were so encrusted with grime that very little daylight could permeate the room, which was lit instead with the stubs of candles sitting on rough wooden tables. The floor seemed at first glance to be earthy, though as Harry stepped onto it he realized that there was stone beneath what seemed to be the accumulated filth of centuries.

Harry remembered Hagrid mentioning this pub in his first year: "*Yeh get a lot o' funny folk in the Hog's Head,*" he had said, explaining how he had won a dragon's egg from a hooded stranger there. At the time Harry had wondered why Hagrid had not found it odd that the stranger kept his face hidden throughout their encounter; now he saw that keeping your face hidden was something of a fashion in the Hog's Head. There was a man at the bar whose whole head was wrapped in dirty gray bandages, though he was still managing to gulp endless glasses of some smoking, fiery substance through a slit over his mouth. Two figures shrouded in hoods sat at a table in one of the windows; Harry might have thought them dementors if they had not been talking in strong Yorkshire accents; in a shadowy corner beside the fireplace sat a witch with a thick, black veil that fell to her toes. They could just see the tip of her nose because it caused the veil to protrude slightly.

"I don't know about this, Hermione," Harry muttered, as they crossed to the bar. He was looking particularly at the heavily veiled witch. "Has it occurred to you Umbridge might be under that?"

Hermione cast an appraising eye at the veiled figure.

"Umbridge is shorter than that woman," she said quietly. "And anyway, even if Umbridge *does* come in here there's nothing she can

do to stop us, Harry, because I've double- and triple-checked the school rules. We're not out-of-bounds; I specifically asked Professor Flitwick whether students were allowed to come in the Hog's Head, and he said yes, but he advised me strongly to bring our own glasses. And I've looked up everything I can think of about study groups and homework groups and they're definitely allowed. I just don't think it's a good idea if we *parade* what we're doing."

"No," said Harry dryly, "especially as it's not exactly a homework group you're planning, is it?"

The barman sidled toward them out of a back room. He was a grumpy-looking old man with a great deal of long gray hair and beard. He was tall and thin and looked vaguely familiar to Harry.

"What?" he grunted.

"Three butterbeers, please," said Hermione.

The man reached beneath the counter and pulled up three very dusty, very dirty bottles, which he slammed on the bar.

"Six Sickles," he said.

"I'll get them," said Harry quickly, passing over the silver. The barman's eyes traveled over Harry, resting for a fraction of a second on his scar. Then he turned away and deposited Harry's money in an ancient wooden till whose drawer slid open automatically to receive it. Harry, Ron, and Hermione retreated to the farthest table from the bar and sat down, looking around, while the man in the dirty gray bandages rapped the counter with his knuckles and received another smoking drink from the barman.

"You know what?" Ron murmured, looking over at the bar with enthusiasm. "We could order anything we liked in here, I bet that

bloke would sell us anything, he wouldn't care. I've always wanted to try firewhisky —"

"You — are — a — *prefect*," snarled Hermione.

"Oh," said Ron, the smile fading from his face. "Yeah. . ."

"So who did you say is supposed to be meeting us?" Harry asked, wrenching open the rusty top of his butterbeer and taking a swig.

"Just a couple of people," Hermione repeated, checking her watch and then looking anxiously toward the door. "I told them to be here about now and I'm sure they all know where it is — oh look, this might be them now —"

The door of the pub had opened. A thick band of dusty sunlight split the room in two for a moment and then vanished, blocked by the incoming rush of a crowd of people.

First came Neville with Dean and Lavender, who were closely followed by Parvati and Padma Patil with (Harry's stomach did a back flip) Cho and one of her usually giggling girlfriends, then (on her own and looking so dreamy that she might have walked in by accident) Luna Lovegood; then Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet, and Angelina Johnson, Colin and Dennis Creevey, Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hannah Abbott, and a Hufflepuff girl with a long plait down her back whose name Harry did not know; three Ravenclaw boys he was pretty sure were called Anthony Goldstein, Michael Corner, and Terry Boot; Ginny, followed by a tall skinny blond boy with an upturned nose whom Harry recognized vaguely as being a member of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, and bringing up the rear, Fred and George Weasley with their friend Lee Jordan, all three of whom were carrying large paper bags crammed with Zonko's

merchandise.

“A couple of people?” said Harry hoarsely to Hermione. “A *couple of people?*”

“Yes, well, the idea seemed quite popular,” said Hermione happily. “Ron, do you want to pull up some more chairs?”

The barman had frozen in the act of wiping out a glass with a rag so filthy it looked as though it had never been washed. Possibly he had never seen his pub so full.

“Hi,” said Fred, reaching the bar first and counting his companions quickly. “Could we have . . . twenty-five butterbeers, please?”

The barman glared at him for a moment, then, throwing down his rag irritably as though he had been interrupted in something very important, he started passing up dusty butterbeers from under the bar.

“Cheers,” said Fred, handing them out. “Cough up, everyone, I haven’t got enough gold for all of these . . .”

Harry watched numbly as the large chattering group took their beers from Fred and rummaged in their robes to find coins. He could not imagine what all these people had turned up for until the horrible thought occurred to him that they might be expecting some kind of speech, at which he rounded on Hermione.

“What have you been telling people?” he said in a low voice. “What are they expecting?”

“I’ve told you, they just want to hear what you’ve got to say,” said Hermione soothingly; but Harry continued to look at her so furiously that she added quickly, “You don’t have to do anything yet, I’ll speak to them first.”

“Hi, Harry,” said Neville, beaming and taking a seat opposite

Harry.

Harry tried to smile back, but did not speak; his mouth was exceptionally dry. Cho had just smiled at him and sat down on Ron's right. Her friend, who had curly reddish-blond hair, did not smile, but gave Harry a thoroughly mistrustful look that told Harry plainly that, given her way, she would not be here at all.

In twos and threes the new arrivals settled around Harry, Ron, and Hermione, some looking rather excited, others curious, Luna Lovegood gazing dreamily into space. When everybody had pulled up a chair, the chatter died out. Every eye was upon Harry.

"Er," said Hermione, her voice slightly higher than usual out of nerves. "Well — er — hi."

The group focused its attention on her instead, though eyes continued to dart back regularly to Harry.

"Well . . . erm . . . well, you know why you're here. Erm . . . well, Harry here had the idea — I mean" — Harry had thrown her a sharp look — "I had the idea — that it might be good if people who wanted to study Defense Against the Dark Arts — and I mean, really study it, you know, not the rubbish that Umbridge is doing with us" — (Hermione's voice became suddenly much stronger and more confident) — "because nobody could call that Defense Against the Dark Arts" — "Hear, hear," said Anthony Goldstein, and Hermione looked heartened — "well, I thought it would be good if we, well, took matters into our own hands."

She paused, looked sideways at Harry, and went on, "And by that I mean learning how to defend ourselves properly, not just theory but the real spells —"

“You want to pass your Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. too though, I bet?” said Michael Corner.

“Of course I do,” said Hermione at once. “But I want more than that, I want to be properly trained in Defense because . . .” She took a great breath and finished, “Because Lord Voldemort’s back.”

The reaction was immediate and predictable. Cho’s friend shrieked and slopped butterbeer down herself, Terry Boot gave a kind of involuntary twitch, Padma Patil shuddered, and Neville gave an odd yelp that he managed to turn into a cough. All of them, however, looked fixedly, even eagerly, at Harry.

“Well . . . that’s the plan anyway,” said Hermione. “If you want to join us, we need to decide how we’re going to —”

“Where’s the proof You-Know-Who’s back?” said the blond Hufflepuff player in a rather aggressive voice.

“Well, Dumbledore believes it —” Hermione began.

“You mean, Dumbledore believes *him*,” said the blond boy, nodding at Harry.

“Who are *you*?” said Ron rather rudely.

“Zacharias Smith,” said the boy, “and I think we’ve got the right to know exactly what makes *him* say You-Know-Who’s back.”

“Look,” said Hermione, intervening swiftly, “that’s really not what this meeting was supposed to be about —”

“It’s okay, Hermione,” said Harry.

It had just dawned upon him why there were so many people there. He felt that Hermione should have seen this coming. Some of these people — maybe even most of them — had turned up in the hope of

hearing Harry's story firsthand.

"What makes me say You-Know-Who's back?" he asked, looking Zacharias straight in the face. "I saw him. But Dumbledore told the whole school what happened last year, and if you didn't believe him, you don't believe me, and I'm not wasting an afternoon trying to convince anyone."

The whole group seemed to have held its breath while Harry spoke. Harry had the impression that even the barman was listening in. He was wiping the same glass with the filthy rag; it was becoming steadily dirtier.

Zacharias said dismissively, "All Dumbledore told us last year was that Cedric Diggory got killed by You-Know-Who and that you brought Diggory's body back to Hogwarts. He didn't give us details, he didn't tell us exactly how Diggory got murdered, I think we'd all like to know —"

"If you've come to hear exactly what it looks like when Voldemort murders someone I can't help you," Harry said. His temper, always so close to the surface these days, was rising again. He did not take his eyes from Zacharias Smith's aggressive face, determined not to look at Cho. "I don't want to talk about Cedric Diggory, all right? So if that's what you're here for, you might as well clear out."

He cast an angry look in Hermione's direction. This was, he felt, all her fault; she had decided to display him like some sort of freak and of course they had all turned up to see just how wild his story was. . . . But none of them left their seats, not even Zacharias Smith, though he continued to gaze intently at Harry.

"So," said Hermione, her voice very high-pitched again. "So

like I was saying . . . if you want to learn some defense, then we need to work out how we're going to do it, how often we're going to meet, and where we're going to —"

"Is it true," interrupted the girl with the long plait down her back, looking at Harry, "that you can produce a Patronus?"

There was a murmur of interest around the group at this.

"Yeah," said Harry slightly defensively.

"A corporeal Patronus?"

The phrase stirred something in Harry's memory.

"Er — you don't know Madam Bones, do you?" he asked.

The girl smiled.

"She's my auntie," she said. "I'm Susan Bones. She told me about your hearing. So — is it really true? You make a stag Patronus?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Blimey, Harry!" said Lee, looking deeply impressed. "I never knew that!"

"Mum told Ron not to spread it around," said Fred, grinning at Harry. "She said you got enough attention as it was."

"She's not wrong," mumbled Harry and a couple of people laughed. The veiled witch sitting alone shifted very slightly in her seat.

"And did you kill a basilisk with that sword in Dumbledore's office?" demanded Terry Boot. "That's what one of the portraits on the wall told me when I was in there last year . . ."

"Er — yeah, I did, yeah," said Harry.

Justin Finch-Fletchley whistled, the Creevey brothers exchanged

awestruck looks, and Lavender Brown said “wow” softly. Harry was feeling slightly hot around the collar now; he was determinedly looking anywhere but at Cho.

“And in our first year,” said Neville to the group at large, “he saved that Sorcerous Stone —”

“Sorcerer’s,” hissed Hermione.

“Yes, that, from You-Know-Who,” finished Neville.

Hannah Abbott’s eyes were as round as Galleons.

“And that’s not to mention,” said Cho (Harry’s eyes snapped onto her, she was looking at him, smiling, his stomach did another somersault), “all the tasks he had to get through in the Triwizard Tournament last year — getting past dragons and merpeople and acromantulas and things . . .”

There was a murmur of impressed agreement around the table. Harry’s insides were squirming. He was trying to arrange his face so that he did not look too pleased with himself. The fact that Cho had just praised him made it much, much harder for him to say the thing he had sworn to himself he would tell them.

“Look,” he said and everyone fell silent at once, “I . . . I don’t want to sound like I’m trying to be modest or anything, but . . . I had a lot of help with all that stuff . . .”

“Not with the dragon, you didn’t,” said Michael Corner at once. “That was a seriously cool bit of flying . . .”

“Yeah, well —” said Harry, feeling it would be churlish to disagree.

“And nobody helped you get rid of those dementors this summer,” said Susan Bones.

“No,” said Harry, “no, okay, I know I did bits of it without help, but the point I’m trying to make is —”

“Are you trying to weasel out of showing us any of this stuff?” said Zacharias Smith.

“Here’s an idea,” said Ron loudly, before Harry could speak, “why don’t you shut your mouth?”

Perhaps the word “weasel” had affected Ron particularly strongly; in any case, he was now looking at Zacharias as though he would like nothing better than to thump him. Zacharias flushed.

“Well, we’ve all turned up to learn from him, and now he’s telling us he can’t really do any of it,” he said.

“That’s not what he said,” snarled Fred Weasley.

“Would you like us to clean out your ears for you?” inquired George, pulling a long and lethal-looking metal instrument from inside one of the Zonko’s bags.

“Or any part of your body, really, we’re not fussy where we stick this,” said Fred.

“Yes, well,” said Hermione hastily, “moving on . . . the point is, are we agreed we want to take lessons from Harry?”

There was a murmur of general agreement. Zacharias folded his arms and said nothing, though perhaps this was because he was too busy keeping an eye on the instrument in George’s hand.

“Right,” said Hermione, looking relieved that something had at last been settled. “Well, then, the next question is how often we do it. I really don’t think there’s any point in meeting less than once a week —”

“Hang on,” said Angelina, “we need to make sure this doesn’t

clash with our Quidditch practice.”

“No,” said Cho, “nor with ours.”

“Nor ours,” added Zacharias Smith.

“I’m sure we can find a night that suits everyone,” said Hermione, slightly impatiently, “but you know, this is rather important, we’re talking about learning to defend ourselves against V-Voldemort’s Death Eaters —”

“Well said!” barked Ernie Macmillan, whom Harry had been expecting to speak long before this. “Personally I think this is really important, possibly more important than anything else we’ll do this year, even with our O.W.L.s coming up!”

He looked around impressively, as though waiting for people to cry, “Surely not!” When nobody spoke, he went on, “I, personally, am at a loss to see why the Ministry has foisted such a useless teacher upon us at this critical period. Obviously they are in denial about the return of You-Know-Who, but to give us a teacher who is trying to actively prevent us from using defensive spells —”

“We think the reason Umbridge doesn’t want us trained in Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Hermione, “is that she’s got some some mad idea that Dumbledore could use the students in the school as a kind of private army. She thinks he’d mobilize us against the Ministry.”

Nearly everybody looked stunned at this news; everybody except Luna Lovegood, who piped up, “Well, that makes sense. After all, Cornelius Fudge has got his own private army.”

“What?” said Harry, completely thrown by this unexpected piece of information.

“Yes, he’s got an army of heliopaths,” said Luna solemnly.

“No, he hasn’t,” snapped Hermione.

“Yes, he has,” said Luna.

“What are heliopaths?” asked Neville, looking blank.

“They’re spirits of fire,” said Luna, her protuberant eyes widening so that she looked madder than ever. “Great tall flaming creatures that gallop across the ground burning everything in front of —”

“They don’t exist, Neville,” said Hermione tartly.

“Oh yes they do!” said Luna angrily.

“I’m sorry, but where’s the *proof* of that?” snapped Hermione.

“There are plenty of eyewitness accounts, just because you’re so narrow-minded you need to have everything shoved under your nose before you —”

“*Hem, hem,*” said Ginny in such a good imitation of Professor Umbridge that several people looked around in alarm and then laughed. “Weren’t we trying to decide how often we’re going to meet and get Defense lessons?”

“Yes,” said Hermione at once, “yes, we were, you’re right . . .”

“Well, once a week sounds cool,” said Lee Jordan.

“As long as —” began Angelina.

“Yes, yes, we know about the Quidditch,” said Hermione in a tense voice. “Well, the other thing to decide is where we’re going to meet . . .”

This was rather more difficult; the whole group fell silent.

“Library?” suggested Katie Bell after a few moments.

“I can’t see Madam Pince being too chuffed with us doing jinxes in

the library,” said Harry.

“Maybe an unused classroom?” said Dean.

“Yeah,” said Ron, “McGonagall might let us have hers, she did when Harry was practicing for the Triwizard . . .”

But Harry was pretty certain that McGonagall would not be so accommodating this time. For all that Hermione had said about study and homework groups being allowed, he had the distinct feeling this one might be considered a lot more rebellious.

“Right, well, we’ll try to find somewhere,” said Hermione. “We’ll send a message round to everybody when we’ve got a time and a place for the first meeting.”

She rummaged in her bag and produced parchment and a quill, then hesitated, rather as though she was steeling herself to say something.

“I-I think everybody should write their name down, just so we know who was here. But I also think,” she took a deep breath, “that we all ought to agree not to shout about what we’re doing. So if you sign, you’re agreeing not to tell Umbridge — or anybody else — what we’re up to.”

Fred reached out for the parchment and cheerfully put down his signature, but Harry noticed at once that several people looked less than happy at the prospect of putting their names on the list.

“Er . . .” said Zacharias slowly, not taking the parchment that George was trying to pass him. “Well . . . I’m sure Ernie will tell me when the meeting is.”

But Ernie was looking rather hesitant about signing too. Hermione raised her eyebrows at him.

“I — well, we are *prefects*,” Ernie burst out. “And if this list was

found . . . well, I mean to say . . . you said yourself, if Umbridge finds out . . .”

“You just said this group was the most important thing you’d do this year,” Harry reminded him.

“I — yes,” said Ernie, “yes, I do believe that, it’s just . . .”

“Ernie, do you really think I’d leave that list lying around?” said Hermione testily.

“No. No, of course not,” said Ernie, looking slightly less anxious.

“I — yes, of course I’ll sign.”

Nobody raised objections after Ernie, though Harry saw Cho’s friend give her a rather reproachful look before adding her name. When the last person — Zacharias — had signed, Hermione took the parchment back and slipped it carefully into her bag. There was an odd feeling in the group now. It was as though they had just signed some kind of contract.

“Well, time’s ticking on,” said Fred briskly, getting to his feet. “George, Lee, and I have got items of a sensitive nature to purchase, we’ll be seeing you all later.”

In twos and threes the rest of the group took their leave too. Cho made rather a business of fastening the catch on her bag before leaving, her long dark curtain of hair swinging forward to hide her face, but her friend stood beside her, arms folded, clicking her tongue, so that Cho had little choice but to leave with her. As her friend ushered her through the door, Cho looked back and waved at Harry.

“Well, I think that went quite well,” said Hermione happily, as she, Harry, and Ron walked out of the Hog’s Head into the bright sunlight.

a few moments later, Harry and Ron still clutching their bottles of butterbeer.

“That Zacharias bloke’s a wart,” said Ron, who was glowering after the figure of Smith just discernible in the distance.

“I don’t like him much either,” admitted Hermione, “but he overheard me talking to Ernie and Hannah at the Hufflepuff table and he seemed really interested in coming, so what could I say? But the more people the better really — I mean, Michael Corner and his friends wouldn’t have come if he hadn’t been going out with Ginny —”

Ron, who had been draining the last few drops from his butterbeer bottle, gagged and sprayed butterbeer down his front.

“He’s WHAT?” said Ron, outraged, his ears now resembling curls of raw beef. “She’s going out with — my sister’s going — what d’you mean, Michael Corner?”

“Well, that’s why he and his friends came, I think — well, they’re obviously interested in learning Defense, but if Ginny hadn’t told Michael what was going on —”

“When did this — when did she — ?”

“They met at the Yule Ball and they got together at the end of last year,” said Hermione composedly. They had turned into the High Street and she paused outside Scrivenshaft’s Quill Shop, where there was a handsome display of pheasant-feather quills in the window. “Hmm . . . I could do with a new quill.”

She turned into the shop. Harry and Ron followed her.

“Which one was Michael Corner?” Ron demanded furiously.

“The dark one,” said Hermione.

"I didn't like him," said Ron at once.

"Big surprise," said Hermione under her breath.

"But," said Ron, following Hermione along a row of quills in copper pots, "I thought Ginny fancied Harry!"

Hermione looked at him rather pityingly and shook her head.

"Ginny *used* to fancy Harry, but she gave up on him months ago. Not that she doesn't *like* you, of course," she added kindly to Harry while she examined a long black-and-gold quill.

Harry, whose head was still full of Cho's parting wave, did not find this subject quite as interesting as Ron, who was positively quivering with indignation, but it did bring something home to him that until now he had not really registered.

"So that's why she talks now?" he asked Hermione. "She never used to talk in front of me."

"Exactly," said Hermione. "Yes, I think I'll have this one . . ."

She went up to the counter and handed over fifteen Sickles and two Knuts, Ron still breathing down her neck.

"Ron," she said severely as she turned and trod on his feet, "this is exactly why Ginny hasn't told you she's seeing Michael, she knew you'd take it badly. So don't harp on about it, for heaven's sake."

"What d'you mean, who's taking anything badly? I'm not going to *harp on* about anything . . ."

Ron continued to chunter under his breath all the way down the street. Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry and then said in an undertone, while Ron was muttering imprecations about Michael Corner, "And talking about Michael and Ginny . . . what about Cho and you?"

“What d’you mean?” said Harry quickly.

It was as though boiling water was rising rapidly inside him; a burning sensation that was causing his face to smart in the cold — had he been that obvious?

“Well,” said Hermione, smiling slightly, “she just couldn’t keep her eyes off you, could she?”

Harry had never before appreciated just how beautiful the village of Hogsmeade was.

In Die Swynenes

Vir twee volle weke nadat sy dit die eerste keer genoem het, praat Hermien nie weer oor die moontlikheid dat Harry Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste moet gee nie. Harry se detensie by Umbridge is uiteindelik verby – die woorde wat nou in sy hand geëts is, sal moontlik nooit heeltemal verdwyn nie. Ron woon nog vier Kwiddiekoefeninge by, en tydens die laaste twee skree niemand op hom nie. En al drie van hulle kry dit reg om hul muise in Transfigurasië te laat verdwyn (Hermien vorder selfs tot klein katjies). Die onderwerp kom eers weer ter sprake op 'n wonderige aand aan die einde van September toe hulle in die biblioteek is om bestanddele vir Snerp se towerdrankies na te slaan.

“Ek het gewonder,” sê Hermien skielik, “of jy weer oor Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste gedink het, Harry.”

“Natuurlik het ek,” sê Harry geïrriteerd. “Ek kan dit nie vergeet nie, nie terwyl daardie ou heks vir ons klas gee nie –”

“Ek bedoel die idee wat ek en Ron gehad het –” Ron kyk onthuts en dreigend na haar en sy frons vir hom. “Ag, oukei, die idee wat ek gehad het – dat jy ons moet leer.”

Harry antwoord nie dadelik nie. Hy is nie regtig lus om te sê wat hy dink nie en maak of hy 'n bladsy in *Asiatiese Teengiwwe* lees.

Hy het die afgelope twee weke dikwels daarvoor nagedink. Soms klink dit net so gek soos die nag toe Hermien dit voorgestel het, maar ander kere betrap hy hom dat hy dink oor die towerspreuke wat die waardevolste was in sy onderonsies met Donker kreature en Doodseters, en hy kom selfs agter dat hy in sy onderbewussyn lesse begin beplan.

“Wel,” sê hy stadig toe hy nie meer kan voorgee dat *Asiatiese Teengiwwe* hom interesseer nie, “ja, ek – ek het 'n bietjie daarvoor gedink.”

“En?” sê Hermien gretig.

“Ek weet nie,” sê Harry. Om te speel vir tyd, kyk hy na Ron.

“Ek het van die begin af gedink dis 'n goeie idee,” sê Ron, wat

meer bereid lyk om sy mening te gee nou dat hy seker is Harry gaan nie weer op hulle skree nie.

Harry skuif ongemaklik in sy stoel rond.

"Julle het gehoor dat ek gesê het 'n groot deel daarvan was geluk, hé?"

"Ja, Harry," sê Hermien versigtig, "maar dis simpel om te maak of jy nie goed met Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste is nie, want jy is. Jy was verlede jaar die enigste een wat die Imperius-vloek heeltemal kon afskud, jy kan 'n Patronus oproep én allerhande ander goed wat party volwasse towenaars nie eens kan doen nie. Viktor liet altyd gesê –"

Ron draai so vinnig na haar, hy verrek amper sy nek. Terwyl hy dit vryf, sê hy, "Ja? Wat sê Vicky?"

"Hô, hô," sê Hermien in 'n verveelde stem. "Hy't gesê Harry kan goed doen wat selfs hy nie kan doen nie en hy was in sy finale jaar by Durmstrang."

Ron kyk agterdogtig na Hermien.

"Het jy nog steeds kontak met hom?"

"Wat as ek het?" sê Hermien kil, hoewel haar gesig effens pienk is. "Ek kan seker 'n penmaat hê as ek –"

"Ek is seker hy wil nie net jou penmaat wees nie," sê Ron beskuldigend.

Hermien skud haar kop moedeloos en ignoreer hom, hoewel hy nog steeds na haar gluur. Sy draai na Harry. "Wel, wat dink jy? Sal jy ons leer?"

"Net vir jou en Ron, oukei?"

"Wel," sê Hermien. Die bekommerde trek is terug op haar gesig. "Moenie weer kwaad word nie, Harry, asseblief . . . maar ek dink regtig jy moet almal leer wat wil. Ek bedoel, ons praat hier van onself verdedig teen W-Woldemort. Ag, moenie pateties wees nie, Ron. Dis nie reg om nie vir ander mense ook 'n kans te gee nie."

Harry dink 'n rukkie voor hy antwoord. "Ek twyfel of enigiemand anders as julle iets by my sal wil leer. Ek's mos mal, onthou."

"Ek dink jy sal verbaas wees hoeveel mense geïnteresseerd sal wees om te hoor wat jy te sê het," sê Hermien ernstig. "Luister . . . die eerste naweek in Oktober is 'n Hogsmeade-naweek. Wat as ons vir almal wat belang stel sê om ons iewers in die dorp te ontmoet sodat ons hieroor kan praat?"

"Hoekom moet dit buite die skool wees?" vra Ron.

"Omdat ek dink Umbridge gaan nie daarvan hou as sy dit moet uitvind nie," sê Hermien en gaan voort met haar tekening van die Chinese koukool.

Harry sien baie uit na die Hogsmeade-naweek, maar hy het een groot bekommernis. Sirius is nog doodstil sedert hy aan die begin van September in die vuur verskyn het. Harry weet hy het hom vergerg toe hulle gesê het hy moenie Hogsmeade toe kom nie, maar hy bekommer hom nog steeds dat Sirius onverskillig sal wees en wel sal kom. Wat gaan hulle doen as 'n groot swart hond in Hogsmeade se strate na hulle toe aangehardloop kom, dalk reg onder Draco Malfoy se neus?

"Wel, jy kan hom nie blameer as hy wil uitkom nie," sê Ron toe Harry sy vrese met hom en Hermien bespreek. "Ek bedoel, hy's al twee jaar op vlug. En ek weet *dit* was nie maklik nie, maar ten minste was hy vry. Nou is hy net saam met daardie mislike elf opgesluit."

Hermien gluur na Ron, maar sê niks oor sy snedige aanmerking oor Skepsel nie.

"Die moeilikheid is," sê sy vir Harry, "dat Sirius uit die oog moet bly tot W-Woldemort – genade *tog*, Ron – openlik begin optree. Ek bedoel, die simpel Ministerie gaan eers erken dat Sirius onskuldig is wanneer hulle bereid is om te glo dat Dompeldorius nog altyd die waarheid praat. En as die spul sotte weer regte Doodseters begin vang, sal hulle gou besef Sirius is nie een nie. . . . ek bedoel, hy't nie eens die Merk nie."

"Ek dink darem nie hy sal so dom wees om te kom nie," sê Ron. "Dompeldorius sal mal gaan en Sirius luister vir Dompeldorius, selfs al hou hy nie van wat hy hoor nie."

Toe Harry nog steeds bekommerd lyk, sê Hermien: "Hoor hier, ek en Ron het 'n bietjie rondgevra en daar is 'n hele paar mense wat behoorlike Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste wil leer. Ons het vir hulle gesê om ons in Hogsmeade te kry."

"Goed," sê Harry, wie se gedagtes nog steeds by Sirius is, vaag. "Jy't genoeg om jou oor te bekommer, Harry," sê Hermien sag. "Jy kan jou nie ook nog oor Sirius verknies nie."

Sy is natuurlik heeltemal reg. Harry kan skaars met sy huiswerk byhou, hoewel dit baie beter gaan nou dat hy nie meer elke aand by Umbridge detensie doen nie. Ron is nog verder agter as Harry. Hy moet nie net twee keer per week Kwiddiek oefen nie, maar het boonop prefekpligte. Hermien neem baie meer vakke as hulle, maar haar huiswerk is nie net op datum nie, sy het ook nog tyd om klere vir die elwe te brei. Harry moet erken sy raak beter – jy kan al amper sien of dit hoede of sokkies is.

Die oggend van die Hogsmeade-besoek is helder maar winderig. Ná ontbyt vorm hulle 'n ry voor die kantoor van Fillis, wat moet kyk of hulle name op die lys van studente is wat met hul ouers of

voogde se verlof mag uitgaan. Harry voel skuldig toe hy onthou dat dit aan Sirius te danke is dat hy ook mag gaan.

Toe Harry by Fillis kom, snuif die opsigter hard asof hy iets probeer ruik en hy knik so kwaai dat sy keelvelle tril.

Harry stap op die kliptrappe uit in die koue sonskyndag. "Hoe kom het Fillis aan jou geruik?" vra Ron terwyl hulle drie vinnig met die breë pad na die skoolhekke begin aanstryk.

"Hy wou seker kyk of ek Misbomme by my het," sê Harry en lag effens. "Ek het vergeet om julle te vertel . . ."

Hy beskryf hoe Fillis by die Uilhuis ingebars het en sy brief wou sien enkele sekondes nadat hy dit vir Sirius gestuur het. Tot sy verbasing interesseer die storie Hermien geweldig, baie meer as wat hy self daarvan gemaak het.

"Hy't gesê hy't 'n wenk gekry dat jy Misbomme gaan bestel? Maar wie sou dit vir hom gesê het?"

"Ek weet nie." Harry haal sy skouers op. "Dalk Malfoy. Hy sal dink dis 'n groot grap."

Hulle stap tussen die hoë klippilare met die geveuelde wildevarke deur en draai dan links, dorp toe. Die wind waai hulle hare in hulle oë.

"Malfoy?" sê Hermien skepties. "Wel . . . ja . . . miskien . . ." Sy bly diep ingedagte tot hulle by Hogsmeade se buitewyke kom.

"Waar kry ons hulle?" vra Harry. "By die Drie Besemstokke?"

"O – nee!" Dit lyk of Hermien wakker skrik. "Nee, dis altyd so vol en raserig. Ek het gesê ons kry hulle in daardie ander kroeg, Die Swynenes, julle weet, daardie een wat nie in die hoofstraat is nie. Dis dalk 'n bietjie . . . hm . . . rof . . . maar die studente gaan nie juis soontoe nie en niemand sal ons kan hoor nie."

Hulle stap in die hoofstraat verby Zonko se Towerpoetse, en niemand is verbaas toe hulle Fred, George en Lee Jordaan daarbinne sien nie, verby die poskantoor waaruit kort-kort 'n paar uile vlieg, en op met 'n systraat na 'n kleinerige herberg. 'n Verweerde houtbord met 'n prent van 'n wildevarkkop wat bloed drup op 'n wit lap wat daarom gebind is, hang aan 'n geroeste klamp bo die deur. Die bord kraak in die wind toe hulle aankom.

Hulle gaan staan skrikkerig voor die deur.

"Wel, sal ons ingaan?" vra Hermien effens senuagtig.

Harry stap eerste in. Dis glad nie soos die Drie Besemstokke met die groot kroegtafel wat warm en skoon is nie. Die Swynenes bestaan uit een klein, rokerige, baie vuil vertrek wat nogal sterk na bokke ruik. Die komvensters is te smerig om veel daglig deur te laat. Druppende kerse brand op ruwe houttafels. Die vloer lyk met

die eerste oogopslag soos vasgestampde grond, maar toe Harry daarop trap, besef hy daar is klip onder die eeue se vullis.

Harry onthou dat Hagrid in sy eerste jaar van hierdie kroeg gepraat het. "Daar's baie snaakse mense in Die Swynenes," het hy gesê toe hy vir Harry vertel het van die draakeier wat hy by 'n vreemdeling met 'n kap oor sy kop gewen het. Dit was vir Harry snaaks dat Hagrid nie agterdogtig was oor die man sy gesig toegedhou het nie, maar nou sien hy dat almal in Die Swynenes hulle gesigte toehou. By die kroegtoonbank sit 'n man wie se hele kop in vuil grys verbande toegewikkel is, maar wat tog eindeloos rokende glase deur 'n spleet voor sy mond leegmaak. Twee figure in kapmantels sit by 'n tafel langs een van die vensters. As hulle nie met sterk Yorkshire-aksente gepraat het nie, sou Harry gedink het hulle is Dementors. In 'n hoek vol skaduwees langs die vuurherd sit 'n heks met 'n dik swart sjaal wat tot op haar voete hang. Net die punt van haar neus steek uit.

"Ek weet nie so lekker hiervan nie, Hermien," mompel Harry toe hulle na die kroegtoonbank stap. Hy staar na die heks met die swaar sjaal. "Sê nou dis Umbridge onder daardie sjaal?"

Hermien kyk ondersoekend na die donker figuur.

"Umbridge is korter," fluister sy. "En in elk geval, selfs al kom Umbridge hierheen, kan sy niks aan ons doen nie. Ek het die skoolreëls twee, drie maal gefynkam. Daar's niks wat sê ons mag nie hier wees nie. Ek het spesifiek vir professor Flickerpitt gevra of studente na Die Swynenes mag gaan en hy't ja gesê, maar ten sterkste aanbeveel dat ons ons eie glase bring. En ek het alles oor studiegroepe en huiswerkgroepe gelees en dit word definitief toegelaat. Ek dink net nie dis 'n goeie idee om met ons planne te koop te loop nie."

"Nee," sê Harry droog, "veral aangesien dit nie regtig 'n huiswerkgroep is wat jy beplan nie."

Die kroegman kom uit 'n agterkamer. Hy is 'n iesegrimmige ou man met lang grys hare en 'n baard. Hy is lank en maer en lyk vir Harry effens bekend.

"Wat?" grom hy.

"Drie Botterbiere, asseblief," sê Hermien.

Die man steek sy hand onder die toonbank in, haal drie baie stowwerige bottels uit en plak hulle op die toonbank neer.

"Ses Sekels," sê hy.

"Ek sal," sê Harry vinnig en gee die silwer aan. Die kroegman se oë speel oor Harry en rus vir 'n oomblik op sy litteken. Dan draai hy weg en sit die geld in 'n antieke kasregister van hout wat vanself oopgaan. Hulle gaan sit by die verste tafel en kyk om hulle rond.

Die man met die kopverbande tik met sy kneukels teen die toonbank en die kroegman gee vir hom nog 'n rokende drankie aan.

"Weet julle wat?" mompel Ron entoesiasties. "Hier kan ons enigiets bestel. Ek wed daardie ou sal enige ding aan ons verkoop. Ek wou nog altyd 'n Vuurwhisky –"

"Jy – is – 'n – *prefek*," snou Hermien.

"O ja," sê Ron en die glimlag verdwyn van sy gesig. "Oukei dan . . ."

"So wie kom almal hierheen?" vra Harry. Hy draai die geroeste koppie van sy Botterbier af en vat 'n sluk.

"Net 'n paar mense," herhaal Hermien en kyk angstig van haar horlosie na die deur. "Ek het gesê hulle moet ongeveer nou hier wees en ek's seker hulle weet almal waar dit is – wag, dis seker nou hulle!"

Die kroegdeur het oopgegaan. 'n Breë strook sonlig verdeel die vertrek vir 'n oomblik in twee, maar verdwyn toe 'n skare mense instroom.

Eers Neville, Dean en Hildegard gevolg deur Parvati en Padma Patel en (Harry se maag trek saam) Cho en een van haar giggelende vriendinne en toe, op haar eie en so dromerig asof sy per ongeluk daar ingedwaal het, Mania Goedlief. Daarna Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet en Angelina Johnson, Colin en Dennis Creevey, Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hanna Abbott, 'n Hoesenproes-meisie met 'n lang donker vlegselsel wie se naam Harry nie ken nie, drie Raweklou-seuns wat hy redelik seker is Antonie Goldstein, Michael Corner en Terry Boot genoem word, Ginny en 'n lang skraal blonde seun met 'n wipneus wat Harry vaagweg weet in die Hoesenproes-kwiddiekspan is. En heel laaste Fred en George Weasley en hul vriend Lee Jordaan, elkeen met 'n groot papiersak vol Zonko-inkopies.

"'n Paar mense?" sê Harry hees vir Hermien. "'n Paar mense?"

"Ja, wel, die idee het nogal aftrek gekry," sê Hermien tevrede. "Ron, trek nog 'n paar stoele nader."

Die kroegman, wat besig was om 'n glas met 'n lap wat lyk of dit nog nooit gewas is nie, uit te vee, word stil. Dit lyk nie of hy al ooit soveel mense in sy kroeg gesien het nie.

"Hallo," sê Fred, wat eerste by die toonbank is. Hy tel die studente. "Kan ons . . . vyf-en-twintig Botterbiere kry, asseblief?"

Die kroegman gluur 'n rukkie na hom, gooi sy lap ergerlik neer asof hy met iets belangriks besig was en begin dan stowwerige Botterbiere onder die toonbank uithaal.

"Gesondheid," sê Fred en deel die bottels uit. "Oukei, julle, waar's die geld? Hoes! Ek het nie genoeg goud vir dit alles nie . . ."

Harry kyk gevoelloos na die groot geselsende groep wat hul

Botterbiere by Fred neem en geld uit hul klede haal. Hy weet regtig nie hoekom al hierdie mense hierheen gekom het nie en wonder skielik of hulle dalk 'n soort toespraak verwag.

Hy kyk na Hermien. "Wat het jy vir hulle gesê?" vra hy in 'n lae stem. "Wat verwag hulle?"

"Ek sê mos, hulle wil net hoor wat jy te sê het," troos Hermien, maar toe Harry nog steeds woedend na haar kyk, sê sy vinnig: "Jy hoef nie dadelik te praat nie, ek sal eers."

"Hallo, Harry," sê Neville vrolik en gaan sit oorkant hom.

Harry glimlag effens, maar praat nie; sy mond is besonder droog. Cho glimlag vir hom en gaan sit aan Ron se regterkant. Haar vriendin, wat krullerige rooiblonde hare het, glimlag nie, maar kyk wantrouig na Harry sodat hy dadelik weet sy wou nie eintlik kom nie.

Die nuwe aankomelinge gaan sit twee-twee en drie-drie om Harry, Ron en Hermien. Party lyk opgewonde, ander bloot nuuskierig. Mania Goedlief staar dromerig in die verte. Toe almal hul stoele nader getrek het, word die geselsery stil en almal kyk na Harry.

"Hm," sê Hermien, haar stem effens skriller as gewoonlik. "Wel – hm – hallo."

Nou kyk die hele groep na haar, hoewel hul oë gereeld na Harry draai.

"Wel – hm – wel, julle weet hoekom julle hier is. Hm . . . Harry het 'n idee gehad – ek bedoel –" (Harry kyk kwaai na haar), "ek het hierdie idee gehad dat dit goed sal wees as die mense wat Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste wil bestudeer – en ek bedoel, regtig bestudeer, nie die gemors wat Umbridge doen nie –" (Hermien se stem klink skielik sterker) "– omdat niemand dit Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste kan noem nie –" ("Hoor, hoor," sê Antonie Goldstein en Hermien lyk bemoedig) "– wel, ek het gedink dit sal goed wees as ons – wel – sake in ons eie hande neem."

Sy bly stil en kyk sydelings na Harry voor sy voortgaan: "En daarmee bedoel ek dat ons leer om ons behoorlik te verdedig, nie net in die teorie nie, maar deur regte toerwerk –"

"Ek neem aan jy wil nog jou UIL in Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste deurkom?" sê Michael Corner, wat stip na haar kyk.

"Natuurlik wil ek," sê Hermien dadelik. "Maar ek wil ook behoorlik opgelei wees in Verdediging omdat . . . omdat . . ." sy trek haar asem diep in, "omdat die heer Woldemort terug is."

Die reaksie is onmiddellik en voorspelbaar. Cho se vriendin gil en mors Botterbier oor haarself; Terry Boot ruk effens, Padma Patel sidder en Neville los 'n vreemde gilletjie wat hy in 'n hoesie verander. Almal kyk egter stip en sels gretig na Harry.

"In elk geval, dis die plan," sê Hermien. "As julle wil aansluit, moet ons besluit hoe ons –"

"Waar is die bewyse dat Jy-Weet-Wie terug is," sê die blonde Hoesenproes-seun in 'n aggressiewe stem.

"Wel, Dompeldorius glo dit –" begin Hermien.

"Jy bedoel Dompeldorius glo vir hom," sê die blonde seun en knik na Harry.

"Wie's jy?" vra Ron nogal onbeskof.

"Sagrys Smit, en ek dink ons het die volste reg om te weet hoekom hy sê Jy-Weet-Wie is terug."

"Luister," sê Hermien vinnig, "dis nie waarom hierdie vergadering veronderstel is om te gaan nie –"

"Dis oukei, Hermien," sê Harry.

Hy het skielik besef hoekom hier so baie mense is. Hy kan nie verstaan dat Hermien dit nie voorsien het nie. Sommige van die mense – dalk die meeste van hulle – het gekom omdat hulle gehoop het hy gaan sy storie vir hulle vertel.

"Hoekom sê ek dat Jy-Weet-Wie terug is?" herhaal hy en kyk Sagrys in die oë. "Omdat ek hom gesien het. Maar Dompeldorius het verlede jaar vir die hele skool vertel wat gebeur het, en as jy hom tóe nie geglo het nie, sal jy my nou ook nie glo nie, en ek gaan nie my hele middag mors deur mense te probeer oortuig nie."

Dis of die hele groep asem opgehou het terwyl Harry praat. Hy kry die indruk dat selfs die kroegman staan en luister – hy vee nog steeds dieselfde glas met die vuil lap uit, sodat dit al vuiler word.

"Al wat Dompeldorius verlede jaar gesê het," sê Sagrys afwysend, "is dat Cedric Diggory deur Jy-Weet-Wie vermoor is en dat jy sy liggaam terug Hogwarts toe gebring het. Hy't nie vir ons besonderhede gegee nie, hy't nie vertel presies hoe Diggory vermoor is nie, ek dink ons wil almal weet –"

"As jy gekom het om te hoor presies hoe dit lyk as Woldemort iemand doodmaak, kan ek jou nie help nie," sê Harry. Hy is al weer besig om sy humeur te verloor, wat deesdae bitter kort is. Hy neem nie sy oë van Sagrys se aggressiewe gesig weg nie en hy wil seker maak dat hy nie na Cho kyk nie. "Ek wil nie oor Cedric Diggory praat nie, oukei? As dit is hoekom julle hier is, moet julle liever loop."

Hy kyk ergerlik na Hermien. Dis alles haar skuld. Sy het besluit om hom soos 'n frats uit te stal en natuurlik wil almal nou sy vergesogte storie hoor. Maar niemand staan op en loop uit nie, nie eens Sagrys Smit nie, hoewel hy nog steeds berekenend na Harry kyk.

"Goed," sê Hermien in haar skrilste stem. "Soos ek gesê het

as julle Verdediging wil leer, moet ons uitwerk hoe ons dit gaan doen, hoe dikwels ons bymekaar gaan kom en waar –

“Is dit waar,” sê die meisie met die lang vlegsels, “dat jy ’n Patronus kan oproep?”

Die groep brom belangstellend.

“Ja,” sê Harry, effens op die verdediging.

“’n Materiële Patronus?”

Die frase maak iets in Harry se geheue wakker. “Hm – ken jy vir Madame Bones?”

Die meisie glimlag. “Sy’s my tante, ek is Susan Bones. Sy’t my van jou verhoor vertel. Dan – dan’s dit waar? Jou Patronus is ’n takbok?”

“Ja,” sê Harry.

“Jislaaik, Harry!” sê Lee diep beïndruk. “Ek het dit nie geweet nie!”

“Ma het vir Ron gesê om dit stil te hou,” sê Fred en grinnik vir Harry. “Sy sê jy trek al klaar genoeg aandag.”

“Sy het ’n punt,” brom Harry en ’n paar mense lag.

Die heks met die sjaal wat alleen eenkant sit, skuif effens op haar stoel rond.

“En jy’t ’n basilisk met daardie swaard in Dompeldorius se kantoer doodgemaak?” vra Terry Boot. “Dis wat een van die portrette laas jaar vir my gesê het toe ek . . .”

“Hm – ja, ek het,” sê Harry.

Justin Finch-Fletchley fluit, die Creevey-broers kyk met groot oë na mekaar en Hildegard Braun sê “Sjoe!” saggies. Harry begin ergerlik raak. Hy weier om na Cho te kyk.

“En in ons eerste jaar,” sê Neville vir die groep, “het hy gekeer dat Jy-Weet-Wie die filologiese se steen kry –”

“Towenaar s’n,” sis Hermien.

“Ja, dit – van Jy-Weet-Wie,” eindig Neville.

Hanna Abbott se oë is so rond soos Galjoene.

“Om nie te praat,” sê Cho (Harry se oë vlieg na haar, sy glimlag vir hom en sy maag slaan bollemakiesie) “van al die take in verlede jaar se Drietowenaarstoernooi nie – daardie drake en die meer-mense en die Akromantula en goed . . .”

Daar is ’n gebrom van beïndrukte stemme om die tafel. Harry se maag draai. Hy probeer om sy gesig so te trek dat hy nie té in sy skik met homself lyk nie. Die feit dat Cho hom so hoog prys, maak dit baie swaarder om dit te sê wat hy voel hy vir hulle moet sê.

“Hoor hier,” begin hy en almal word dadelik stil, “ek . . . ek wil nie klink asof ek beskeie probeer wees of iets nie, maar . . . ek het baie hulp gehad met al daardie goed . . .”

“Nie met die draak nie,” sê Michael Corner dadelik. “Dit was jol-
lic goeie vliegwerk . . .”

“Ja – wel –” Harry voel dit sal simpel wees om te stry.

“En niemand het jou in die vakansie teen daardie Dementors ge-
help nie,” sê Susan Bones.

“Nee,” sê Harry, “nee, goed, ek weet daar’s stukke daarvan wat ek
alleen gedoen het. Maar wat ek probeer sê, is –”

“Probeer jy jou uit ’n demonstrasie wikkkel?” vra Sagrys Smit.

“Ek het ’n voorstel,” sê Ron voor Harry kan antwoord. “Hoekom
hou jy nie liewer jou snater nie?” Hy gluur na Sagrys, wat rooi word.

“Ons het almal hierheen gekom om by hom te leer en nou vertel
hy ons hy kan dit nie regtig doen nie,” verweer Sagrys.

“Dis nie wat hy gesê het nie,” snou Fred.

“Moet ons jou ore vir jou skoonmaak?” vra George en haal ’n
lang, skerp metaalinstrument uit een van die Zonko-sakke.

“Of enige ander liggaamsholte, ons is nie puntenerig nie,” sê Fred.

“Ja, goed,” sê Hermien haastig, “kom ons laat dit daar . . . Die
punt is, stem julle saam dat Harry vir ons lesse gee?”

Daar is ’n algemene gebrom van instemming. Sagrys kruis sy
arms en sê niks, hoewel dit dalk is omdat hy te besig is om die
instrument in Fred se hand dop te hou.

“Goed,” sê Hermien en sy lyk verlig dat hulle darem oor iets
saamstem. “Wel, die tweede vraag is hoe dikwels. Ek dink minder
as een keer per week is nie sinvol nie –”

“Wag ’n bietjie,” sê Angelina. “Dit mag nie met ons Kwiddiek-
oefening bots nie.”

“Ook nie met ons s’n nie,” sê Cho.

“Of ons s’n,” sê Sagrys Smit.

“Ek is seker ons sal ’n aand kry wat almal pas,” sê Hermien effens
ongeduldig, “maar julle moet onthou, dis regtig belangrik. Ons
praat hier van onself teen W-Woldemort se Doodseters verdedig –”

“Skote!” sê Ernie Macmillan. Harry is verbaas dat hy so lank stilge-
bly het. “Persoonlik dink ek dis regtig belangrik, dalk belangriker as
enigiets anders wat ons vanjaar sal doen, selfs as die Uile wat voorlê.”

Hy kyk gewigtig rond asof hy verwag mense gaan goed soos
“Nooit!” en “Regtig?” sê. Toe niemand reageer nie, gaan hy voort:
“Persoonlik kan ek nie insien hoekom die Ministerie so ’n nuttelose
onderwyser in hierdie kritieke tyd aan ons opgedwing het nie.
Goed, ek weet hulle ontken dat Jy-Weet-Wie teruggekeer het, maar
om darem vir ons ’n onderwyser te gee wat weier om vir ons
Verdedigende Toorkunste te leer –”

“Ons dink die rede hoekom Umbridge ons nie wil oplei teen die

Donker Kunste nie, is omdat sy hierdie . . . hierdie mal idee het dat Dompeldorius sy studente as 'n soort privaat leer gaan oplei en teen die Ministerie gaan gebruik," sê Hermien.

Amper almal lyk geskok deur hierdie nuus, behalwe Mania Goedlief. "Wel, dit maak sin," sê sy. "Cornelius Broddelwerk het immers sy eie privaat leer."

"Wat?" sê Harry geskok deur dié onverwagte brokkie inligting.

"Ja, hy het 'n leer van heliopate," sê Mania ernstig.

"Nee, hy het nie," snou Hermien.

"Ja, hy het," sê Mania.

"Wat is heliopate?" Neville lyk verward.

"Vuurgeeste," sê Mania en haar uitpeuloë rek groot sodat sy nog maller lyk. "Groot, hoë, vlammente wesens wat oor die aarde galop en alles om hulle verbrand –"

"Hulle bestaan nie, Neville," sê Hermien skerp.

"O ja, hulle bestaan!" sê Mania kwaai.

"Ek is jammer, maar waar is die bewyse?" snou Hermien.

"Daar is baie ooggetuies. Net omdat jy so bekrompe is dat alles onder jou neus gedruk moet word, beteken nie –"

"Hem, hem," sê Ginny en dis so 'n goeie nabootsing van professor Umbridge dat 'n hele paar mense verskrik omkyk en toe begin lag. "Ek dag ons is besig om te besluit hoe dikwels ons Verdedigingslesse gaan hê?"

"Ja," sê Hermien dadelik, "ja, jy's reg, Ginny."

"Wel, een keer per week klink goed," sê Lee Jordaan.

"Solank –" begin Angelina.

"Ja, ja, ons weet van Kwiddiek," sê Hermien stroef. "Wel, die ander ding wat ons moet besluit, is waar om bymekaar te kom . . ."

Dis heelwat moeiliker en die groep word stil.

"Die biblioteek?" stel Katie Bell ná 'n rukkie voor.

"Ek dink nie Madame Pince gaan daarvan hou as ons vloeke in die biblioteek oefen nie," sê Harry.

"Wat van 'n leë klas?" sê Dean.

"Ja," sê Ron. "McGonagall sal dalk hare vir ons leen, sy het al tevore toe Harry vir die Drietowenaars geoefen het."

Maar Harry is taamlik seker dat McGonagall nie hierdie keer so insiklik sal wees nie. Hoewel studie- en huiswerkgroepe volgens Hermien toegelaat word, is hy oortuig dat hierdie groep as opruiend beskou sal word.

"Goed, wel, ons moet 'n plek probeer kry," sê Hermien. "Ons sal almal laat weet sodra ons 'n tyd en 'n plek vir die eerste byeenkoms het."

Sy krap in haar sak en haal perkament en 'n veerpen uit. Dan wys sy effens, asof sy haar staal vir wat sy gaan sê.

“Ek – ek dink almal moet hulle name hierop neerskryf sodat ons kan weet wie hier was. Maar ek dink ook,” sy trek haar asem diep in, “ons moet ooreenkom om met niemand hieroor te praat nie. As julle hier teken, dan stem julle in om niks vir Umbridge of enigiemand anders te sê nie.”

Fred steek sy hand uit na die perkament en maak sy handtekening ewe vrolik, maar Harry let op dat verskeie ander mense nie baie lus lyk om hul name neer te skryf nie.

“Hm...” sê Sagrys stadig. Hy neem nie die perkament toe George dit vir hom wil aangee nie. “Wel... ek is seker Ernie sal vir my sê wanneer ons gaan bymekaarkom.”

Maar Ernie lyk ook huiwerig om te teken. Hermien kyk met opgetrekte wenkbroue na hom.

“Ek – wel, ons is *prefekte*,” sê Ernie heftig. “En as iemand hierdie lys moet kry... ek bedoel... jy’t self gesê as Umbridge moet weet –”

“Jy’t pas gesê hierdie groep is die belangrikste ding wat jy vanjaar gaan doen,” herinner Harry hom.

“Ek – ja,” sê Ernie, “ja, dit is so, dis net –”

“Ernie, dink jy regtig ek gaan hierdie lys laat rondlê?” sê Hermien ergerlik.

“Nee. Nee, natuurlik nie.” Ernie lyk effens minder benoud. “Ek – ja, natuurlik sal ek dit teken.”

Daar is geen verdere besware nie, hoewel Harry oplet dat Cho se vriendin verwykend na haar kyk voor sy haar naam neerskryf. Toe die laaste persoon – Sagrys – geteken het, neem Hermien die perkament en steek dit sorgvuldig in haar sak. ’n Vreemde gevoel heers nou in die groep, asof hulle pas ’n soort kontrak geteken het.

“Wel, die tyd stap aan,” sê Fred flink en staan op. “Ek en George en Lee moet nog ’n paar... sensitiewe goedjies gaan koop. Sien julle later.”

Die res verlaat die groep in twees en drieë. Cho sukkel lank met haar sak se knip terwyl haar lang donker hare soos ’n gordyn voor haar gesig swaai, maar haar vriendin staan met gevoude arms en klik haar tong tot Cho saam met haar uitstap. Toe hulle by die deur kom, kyk Cho om en waai vir Harry.

“Wel, dit het nogal goed gegaan,” sê Hermien tevrede toe sy, Harry en Ron ’n paar oomblikke later by Die Swynenes uitstap. Harry en Ron neem hul Botterbier saam buitentoe, waar die son helder skyn.

“Daardie Sagrys is ’n etter,” sê Ron en gluur na Sagrys wat net-net in die verte sigbaar is.

“Ek hou ook nie baie van hom nie,” erken Hermien, “maar hy’t gehoor toe ek met Ernie en Hanna by die Hoesenproes-tafel praat en dit het gelyk of hy regtig belang stel, dus kon ek nie anders nie. Maar hoe meer mense, hoe beter, regtig. Ek bedoel, Michael Corner en sy vriende sou nie gekom het as hy nie met Ginny uitgegaan –”

Ron, wat die laaste paar druppels uit sy Botterbierbottel geskud het, stik en spoeg Botterbier oor sy bors.

“Hy WAT?” proes hy woedend, sy ore so rooi soos bete. “Sy gaan uit met – my suster gaan – wat bedoel jy, Michael Corner?”

“Wel, ek dink dis hoekom hy en sy vriende gekom het. Hulle wil natuurlik Verdediging leer, maar as Ginny nie vir Michael gesê het –”

“Wanneer het dit – wanneer het sy –?”

“Hulle het mekaar by die Kersbal ontmoet en hulle is al van laas jaar se einde af saam,” sê Hermien onverstoord. Hulle draai in by Hoogstraat en sy gaan staan voor Die Griffel & Veerpen, wat ’n mooi uitstalling van fisantveerpenne in die venster het. “Hm... ek kan ’n nuwe veerpen gebruik.”

Sy stap in en Harry en Ron stap agterna.

“Watter een was Michael Corner?” vra Ron aggressief.

“Die donkerkop,” sê Hermien.

“Ek het nie van hom gehou nie,” sê Ron dadelik.

“Dis ’n verrassing!” prewel Hermien.

“Maar,” Ron stap agter Hermien aan verby ’n ry veerpenne in koperpotte, “ek dag Ginny hou van Harry!”

Hermien kyk bejammerend na hom en skud haar kop.

“Ginny het van Harry gehou, maar sy’t maande gelede al moed opgegee. Nie dat sy nie van jou hou nie, Harry,” voeg sy vinnig by terwyl sy ’n lang swart-en-goue veerpen bekijk.

Vir Harry, wat nog steeds in sy gedagtes sien hoe Cho vir hom waai, is die onderwerp nie naastenby so interessant soos vir Ron nie. Ron bewe van verontwaardiging.

Maar Harry verstaan skielik iets. “Dan is dit hoekom sy deesdae praat,” sê hy vir Hermien. “Sy’t nooit voorheen gepraat as ek by is nie.”

“Presies,” sê Hermien. “Ja, ek dink ek sal hierdie een vat...”

Sy gaan na die toonbank en haal vyftien Sekels en twee Knoete uit, terwyl Ron hard agter haar asemhaal.

“Ron,” sê sy kwaai toe sy omdraai en op sy voet trap, “dis presies hoekom Ginny nie vir jou wou sê dat sy en Michael uitgaan nie. Sy’t geweet jy sal dit nie kan hanteer nie. Hou tog net op, om vaders-naam.”

“Wat bedoel jy? Wie kan wat nie hanteer nie? Ek gaan nie aan-
gaan daaroor nie . . . ?” skel Ron saggies terwyl hulle straataf stap.

Hermien rol haar oë vir Harry en sê gedemp terwyl Ron nog
steeds onderlangs oor Michael Corner brom: “Van Michael en Ginny
gepraat, Harry . . . wat van jou en Cho?”

“Wat bedoel jy?” vra Harry vinnig.

Dit voel of sy lyf skielik vol kokende water loop en sy hele gesig
brand in die koue. Is dit dan só ooglopend?

“Wel.” Hermien glimlag effens. “Sy kan nie haar oë van jou afhou
nie, of hoe?”

Vir Harry het die dorpie Hogsmeade nog nooit so mooi gelyk
nie.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



EDUCATIONAL DECREE NUMBER TWENTY-FOUR

Harry felt happier for the rest of the weekend than he had done all term. He and Ron spent much of Sunday catching up with all their homework again, and although this could hardly be called fun, the last burst of autumn sunshine persisted, so rather than sitting hunched over tables in the common room, they took their work outside and lounged in the shade of a large beech tree on the edge of the lake. Hermione, who of course was up to date with all her work, brought more wool outside with her and bewitched her knitting needles so that they flashed and clicked in midair beside her, producing more hats and scarves.

The knowledge that they were doing something to resist Umbridge and the Ministry, and that he was a key part of the rebellion, gave

Harry a feeling of immense satisfaction. He kept reliving Saturday's meeting in his mind: all those people, coming to him to learn Defense Against the Dark Arts . . . and the looks on their faces as they had heard some of the things he had done . . . and Cho praising his performance in the Triwizard Tournament . . . The knowledge that all those people did not think him a lying weirdo, but someone to be admired, buoyed him up so much that he was still cheerful on Monday morning, despite the imminent prospect of all his least favorite classes.

He and Ron headed downstairs from their dormitory together, discussing Angelina's idea that they were to work on a new move called the Sloth Grip Roll during that night's Quidditch practice, and not until they were halfway across the sunlit common room did they notice the addition to the room that had already attracted the attention of a small group of people.

A large sign had been affixed to the Gryffindor notice board, so large that it covered everything else on there — the lists of secondhand spellbooks for sale, the regular reminders of school rules from Argus Filch, the Quidditch team training schedule, the offers to barter certain Chocolate Frog cards for others, the Weasleys' new advertisement for testers, the dates of the Hogsmeade weekends, and the lost-and-found notices. The new sign was printed in large black letters and there was a highly official-looking seal at the bottom beside a neat and curly signature.

————— BY ORDER OF —————

The High Inquisitor of Hogwarts

All Student Organizations, Societies, Teams, Groups, and Clubs are henceforth disbanded.

An Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club is hereby defined as a regular meeting of three or more students.

Permission to re-form may be sought from the High Inquisitor (Professor Umbridge).

No Student Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club may exist without the knowledge and approval of the High Inquisitor.

Any student found to have formed, or to belong to, an Organization, Society, Team, Group, or Club that has not been approved by the High Inquisitor will be expelled.

*The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number
Twenty-four.*

Signed:

Dolores Jane Umbridge

HIGH INQUISITOR



Harry and Ron read the notice over the heads of some anxious-looking second years.

“Does this mean they’re going to shut down the Gobstones Club?” one of them asked his friend.

“I reckon you’ll be okay with Gobstones,” Ron said darkly, making the second year jump. “I don’t think we’re going to be as lucky,

though, do you?" he asked Harry as the second years hurried away.

Harry was reading the notice through again. The happiness that had filled him since Saturday was gone. His insides were pulsing with rage.

"This isn't a coincidence," he said, his hands forming fists. "She knows."

"She can't," said Ron at once.

"There were people listening in that pub. And let's face it, we don't know how many of the people who turned up we can trust. . . . Any of them could have run off and told Umbridge . . ."

And he had thought they believed him, thought they even admired him . . .

"Zacharias Smith!" said Ron at once, punching a fist into his hand. "Or — I thought that Michael Corner had a really shifty look too —"

"I wonder if Hermione's seen this yet?" Harry said, looking around at the door to the girls' dormitories.

"Let's go and tell her," said Ron. He bounded forward, pulled open the door, and set off up the spiral staircase.

He was on the sixth stair when it happened. There was a loud, wailing, klaxonlike sound and the steps melted together to make a long, smooth stone slide. There was a brief moment when Ron tried to keep running, arms working madly like windmills, then he toppled over backward and shot down the newly created slide, coming to rest on his back at Harry's feet.

"Er — I don't think we're allowed in the girls' dormitories," said Harry, pulling Ron to his feet and trying not to laugh.

Two fourth-year girls came zooming gleefully down the stone

slide.

“Oooh, who tried to get upstairs?” they giggled happily, leaping to their feet and ogling Harry and Ron.

“Me,” said Ron, who was still rather disheveled. “I didn’t realize that would happen. It’s not fair!” he added to Harry, as the girls headed off for the portrait hole, still giggling madly. “Hermione’s allowed in our dormitory, how come we’re not allowed — ?”

“Well, it’s an old-fashioned rule,” said Hermione, who had just slid neatly onto a rug in front of them and was now getting to her feet, “but it says in *Hogwarts: A History* that the founders thought boys were less trustworthy than girls. Anyway, why were you trying to get in there?”

“To see you — look at this!” said Ron, dragging her over to the notice board.

Hermione’s eyes slid rapidly down the notice. Her expression became stony.

“Someone must have blabbed to her!” Ron said angrily.

“They can’t have done,” said Hermione in a low voice.

“You’re so naive,” said Ron, “you think just because you’re all honorable and trustworthy —”

“No, they can’t have done because I put a jinx on that piece of parchment we all signed,” said Hermione grimly. “Believe me, if anyone’s run off and told Umbridge, we’ll know exactly who they are and they will really regret it.”

“What’ll happen to them?” said Ron eagerly.

“Well, put it this way,” said Hermione, “it’ll make Eloise Midgen’s acne look like a couple of cute freckles. Come on, let’s get

down to breakfast and see what the others think. . . . I wonder whether this has been put up in all the Houses?"

It was immediately apparent on entering the Great Hall that Umbridge's sign had not only appeared in Gryffindor Tower. There was a peculiar intensity about the chatter and an extra measure of movement in the Hall as people scurried up and down their tables conferring on what they had read. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had barely taken their seats when Neville, Dean, Fred, George, and Ginny descended upon them.

"Did you see it?"

"D'you reckon she knows?"

"What are we going to do?"

They were all looking at Harry. He glanced around to make sure there were no teachers near them.

"We're going to do it anyway, of course," he said quietly.

"Knew you'd say that," said George, beaming and thumping Harry on the arm.

"The prefects as well?" said Fred, looking quizzically at Ron and Hermione.

"Of course," said Hermione coolly.

"Here comes Ernie and Hannah Abbott," said Ron, looking over his shoulder. "*And* those Ravenclaw blokes and Smith. . . and no one looks very spotty."

Hermione looked alarmed.

"Never mind spots, the idiots can't come over here now, it'll look really suspicious — sit down!" she mouthed to Ernie and Hannah, gesturing frantically to them to rejoin the Hufflepuff table. "Later!"

We'll — talk — to — you — *later!*"

"I'll tell Michael," said Ginny impatiently, swinging herself off her bench. "The fool, honestly . . ."

She hurried off toward the Ravenclaw table; Harry watched her go. Cho was sitting not far away, talking to the curly-haired friend she had brought along to the Hog's Head. Would Umbridge's notice scare her off meeting them again?

But the full repercussions of the sign were not felt until they were leaving the Great Hall for History of Magic.

"Harry! Ron!"

It was Angelina and she was hurrying toward them looking perfectly desperate.

"It's okay," said Harry quietly, when she was near enough to hear him. "We're still going to —"

"You realize she's including Quidditch in this?" Angelina said over him. "We have to go and ask permission to re-form the Gryffindor team!"

"*What?*" said Harry.

"No way," said Ron, appalled.

"You read the sign, it mentions teams too! So listen, Harry . . . I am saying this for the last time. . . . Please, *please* don't lose your temper with Umbridge again or she might not let us play anymore!"

"Okay, okay," said Harry, for Angelina looked as though she was on the verge of tears. "Don't worry, I'll behave myself . . ."

"Bet Umbridge is in History of Magic," said Ron grimly, as they set off for Binns's lesson. "She hasn't inspected Binns yet. . . . Bet you anything she's there . . ."

But he was wrong; the only teacher present when they entered was Professor Binns, floating an inch or so above his chair as usual and preparing to continue his monotonous drone on giant wars. Harry did not even attempt to follow what he was saying today; he doodled idly on his parchment ignoring Hermione's frequent glares and nudges, until a particularly painful poke in the ribs made him look up angrily.

"What?"

She pointed at the window. Harry looked around. Hedwig was perched on the narrow window ledge, gazing through the thick glass at him, a letter tied to her leg. Harry could not understand it; they had just had breakfast, why on earth hadn't she delivered the letter then, as usual? Many of his classmates were pointing out Hedwig to each other too.

"Oh, I've always loved that owl, she's so beautiful," Harry heard Lavender sigh to Parvati.

He glanced around at Professor Binns who continued to read his notes, serenely unaware that the class's attention was even less focused upon him than usual. Harry slipped quietly off his chair, crouched down, and hurried along the row to the window, where he slid the catch and opened it very slowly.

He had expected Hedwig to hold out her leg so that he could remove the letter and then fly off to the Owlery, but the moment the window was open wide enough she hopped inside, hooting dolefully. He closed the window with an anxious glance at Professor Binns, crouched low again, and sped back to his seat with Hedwig on his shoulder. He regained his seat, transferred Hedwig to his lap, and made to remove the letter tied to her leg.

It was only then that he realized that Hedwig's feathers were oddly ruffled; some were bent the wrong way, and she was holding one of her wings at an odd angle.

"She's hurt!" Harry whispered, bending his head low over her. Hermione and Ron leaned in closer; Hermione even put down her quill. "Look — there's something wrong with her wing —"

Hedwig was quivering; when Harry made to touch the wing she gave a little jump, all her feathers on end as though she was inflating herself, and gazed at him reproachfully.

"Professor Binns," said Harry loudly, and everyone in the class turned to look at him. "I'm not feeling well."

Professor Binns raised his eyes from his notes, looking amazed, as always, to find the room in front of him full of people.

"Not feeling well?" he repeated hazily.

"Not at all well," said Harry firmly, getting to his feet while concealing Hedwig behind his back. "So I think I'll need to go to the hospital wing."

"Yes," said Professor Binns, clearly very much wrong-footed. "Yes . . . yes, hospital wing . . . well, off you go, then, Perkins . . ."

Once outside the room Harry returned Hedwig to his shoulder and hurried off up the corridor, pausing to think only when he was out of sight of Binns's door. His first choice of somebody to cure Hedwig would have been Hagrid, of course, but as he had no idea where Hagrid was, his only remaining option was to find Professor Grubbly-Plank and hope she would help.

He peered out of a window at the blustery, overcast grounds. There was no sign of her anywhere near Hagrid's cabin; if she was

not teaching, she was probably in the staffroom. He set off downstairs, Hedwig hooting feebly as she swayed on his shoulder.

Two stone gargoyles flanked the staffroom door. As Harry approached, one of them croaked, "You should be in class, sunny Jim"

"This is urgent," said Harry curtly.

"Ooooh, *urgent*, is it?" said the other gargoyle in a high-pitched voice. "Well, that's put *us* in our place, hasn't it?"

Harry knocked; he heard footsteps and then the door opened and he found himself face-to-face with Professor McGonagall.

"You haven't been given another detention!" she said at once, her square spectacles flashing alarmingly.

"No, Professor!" said Harry hastily.

"Well then, why are you out of class?"

"It's *urgent*, apparently," said the second gargoyle snidely.

"I'm looking for Professor Grubbly-Plank," Harry explained. "It's my owl, she's injured."

"Injured owl, did you say?"

Professor Grubbly-Plank appeared at Professor McGonagall's shoulder, smoking a pipe and holding a copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

"Yes," said Harry, lifting Hedwig carefully off his shoulder, "she turned up after the other post owls and her wing's all funny, look —"

Professor Grubbly-Plank stuck her pipe firmly between her teeth and took Hedwig from Harry while Professor McGonagall watched.

"Hmm," said Professor Grubbly-Plank, her pipe wagging slightly as she talked. "Looks like something's attacked her. Can't think what

would have done it, though. . . . Thestrals will sometimes go for birds, of course, but Hagrid's got the Hogwarts thestrals well trained not to touch owls . . . ”

Harry neither knew nor cared what thestrals were, he just wanted to know that Hedwig was going to be all right. Professor McGonagall, however, looked sharply at Harry and said, “Do you know how far this owl's traveled, Potter?”

“Er,” said Harry. “From London, I think.”

He met her eyes briefly and knew that she understood “London” to mean “number twelve, Grimmauld Place” by the way her eyebrows had joined in the middle.

Professor Grubbly-Plank pulled a monocle out of the inside of her robes and screwed it into her eye to examine Hedwig's wing closely. “I should be able to sort this out if you leave her with me, Potter,” she said. “She shouldn't be flying long distances for a few days, in any case.”

“Er — right — thanks,” said Harry, just as the bell rang for break.

“No problem,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank gruffly, turning back into the staffroom.

“Just a moment, Wilhelmina!” said Professor McGonagall. “Potter's letter!”

“Oh yeah!” said Harry, who had momentarily forgotten the scroll tied to Hedwig's leg. Professor Grubbly-Plank handed it over and then disappeared into the staffroom carrying Hedwig, who was staring at Harry as though unable to believe he would give her away like this. Feeling slightly guilty, he turned to go, but Professor McGonagall called him back.

“Potter!”

“Yes, Professor?”

She glanced up and down the corridor; there were students coming from both directions.

“Bear in mind,” she said quickly and quietly, her eyes on the scroll in his hand, “that channels of communication in and out of Hogwarts may be being watched, won’t you?”

“I —” said Harry, but the flood of students rolling along the corridor was almost upon him. Professor McGonagall gave him a curt nod and retreated into the staffroom, leaving Harry to be swept out into the courtyard with the crowd. Here he spotted Ron and Hermione already standing in a sheltered corner, their cloak collars turned up against the wind. Harry slit open the scroll as he hurried toward them and found five words in Sirius’s handwriting:

Today, same time, same place.

“Is Hedwig okay?” asked Hermione anxiously, the moment he was within earshot.

“Where did you take her?” asked Ron.

“To Grubbly-Plank,” said Harry. “And I met McGonagall. Listen . . .”

And he told them what Professor McGonagall had said. To his surprise, neither of the others looked shocked; on the contrary, they exchanged significant looks.

“What?” said Harry, looking from Ron to Hermione and back again.

“Well, I was just saying to Ron . . . what if someone had tried to intercept Hedwig? I mean, she’s never been hurt on a flight before, has she?”

“Who’s the letter from anyway?” asked Ron, taking the note from Harry.

“Snuffles,” said Harry quietly.

“‘Same time, same place’? Does he mean the fire in the common room?”

“Obviously,” said Hermione, also reading the note. She looked uneasy. “I just hope nobody else has read this . . .”

“But it was still sealed and everything,” said Harry, trying to convince himself as much as her. “And nobody would understand what it meant if they didn’t know where we’d spoken to him before, would they?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione anxiously, hitching her bag back over her shoulder as the bell rang again. “It wouldn’t be exactly difficult to reseal the scroll by magic. . . . And if anyone’s watching the Floo Network . . . but I don’t really see how we can warn him not to come without *that* being intercepted too!”

They trudged down the stone steps to the dungeons for Potions, all three of them lost in thought, but as they reached the bottom of the stairs they were recalled to themselves by the voice of Draco Malfoy, who was standing just outside Snape’s classroom door, waving around an official-looking piece of parchment and talking much louder than was necessary so that they could hear every word.

“Yeah, Umbridge gave the Slytherin Quidditch team permission to continue playing straightaway, I went to ask her first thing this

morning. Well, it was pretty much automatic, I mean, she knows my father really well, he's always popping in and out of the Ministry. It'll be interesting to see whether Gryffindor are allowed to keep playing, won't it?"

"Don't rise," Hermione whispered imploringly to Harry and Ron, who were both watching Malfoy, faces set and fists clenched. "It's what he wants . . ."

"I mean," said Malfoy, raising his voice a little more, his gray eyes glittering malevolently in Harry and Ron's direction, "if it's a question of influence with the Ministry, I don't think they've got much chance. . . . From what my father says, they've been looking for an excuse to sack Arthur Weasley for years. . . . And as for Potter. My father says it's a matter of time before the Ministry has him carted off to St. Mungo's. . . . apparently they've got a special ward for people whose brains have been addled by magic . . ."

Malfoy made a grotesque face, his mouth sagging open and his eyes rolling. Crabbe and Goyle gave their usual grunts of laughter, Pansy Parkinson shrieked with glee.

Something collided hard with Harry's shoulder, knocking him sideways. A split second later he realized that Neville had just charged past him, heading straight for Malfoy.

"Neville, *no!*"

Harry leapt forward and seized the back of Neville's robes; Neville struggled frantically, his fists flailing, trying desperately to get at Malfoy who looked, for a moment, extremely shocked.

"Help me!" Harry flung at Ron, managing to get an arm around Neville's neck and dragging him backward, away from the

Slytherins. Crabbe and Goyle were now flexing their arms, closing in front of Malfoy, ready for the fight. Ron hurried forward and seized Neville's arms; together, he and Harry succeeded in dragging Neville back into the Gryffindor line. Neville's face was scarlet; the pressure Harry was exerting on his throat rendered him quite incomprehensible, but odd words spluttered from his mouth.

"Not . . . funny . . . don't . . . Mungo's . . . show . . . him . . ."

The dungeon door opened. Snape appeared there. His black eyes swept up the Gryffindor line to the point where Harry and Ron were wrestling with Neville.

"Fighting, Potter, Weasley, Longbottom?" Snape said in his cold, sneering voice. "Ten points from Gryffindor. Release Longbottom, Potter, or it will be detention. Inside, all of you."

Harry let go of Neville, who stood panting and glaring at him.

"I had to stop you," Harry gasped, picking up his bag. "Crabbe and Goyle would've torn you apart."

Neville said nothing, he merely snatched up his own bag and stalked off into the dungeon.

"What in the name of Merlin," said Ron slowly, as they followed Neville, "was *that* about?"

Harry did not answer. He knew exactly why the subject of people who were in St. Mungo's because of magical damage to their brains was highly distressing to Neville, but he had sworn to Dumbledore that he would not tell anyone Neville's secret. Even Neville did not know that Harry knew.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione took their usual seats at the back of the class and pulled out parchment, quills, and their copies of *One*

Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi. The class around them was whispering about what Neville had just done, but when Snape closed the dungeon door with an echoing bang everybody fell silent immediately.

“You will notice,” said Snape in his low, sneering voice, “that we have a guest with us today.”

He gestured toward the dim corner of the dungeon, and Harry saw Professor Umbridge sitting there, clipboard on her knee. He glanced sideways at Ron and Hermione, his eyebrows raised. Snape and Umbridge, the two teachers he hated most . . . it was hard to decide which he wanted to triumph over the other.

“We are continuing with our Strengthening Solutions today, you will find your mixtures as you left them last lesson, if correctly made they should have matured well over the weekend — instructions” — he waved his wand again — “on the board. Carry on.”

Professor Umbridge spent the first half hour of the lesson making notes in her corner. Harry was very interested in hearing her question Snape, so interested, that he was becoming careless with his potion again.

“Salamander blood, Harry!” Hermione moaned, grabbing his wrist to prevent him adding the wrong ingredient for the third time. “Not pomegranate juice!”

“Right,” said Harry vaguely, putting down the bottle and continuing to watch the corner. Umbridge had just gotten to her feet. “Ha,” he said softly, as she strode between two lines of desks toward Snape, who was bending over Dean Thomas’s cauldron.

“Well, the class seems fairly advanced for their level,” she said

briskly to Snape's back. "Though I would question whether it is advisable to teach them a potion like the Strengthening Solution. I think the Ministry would prefer it if that was removed from the syllabus."

Snape straightened up slowly and turned to look at her.

"Now . . . how long have you been teaching at Hogwarts?" she asked, her quill poised over her clipboard.

"Fourteen years," Snape replied. His expression was unfathomable. His eyes on Snape, Harry added a few drops to his potion; it hissed menacingly and turned from turquoise to orange.

"You applied first for the Defense Against the Dark Arts post, I believe?" Professor Umbridge asked Snape.

"Yes," said Snape quietly.

"But you were unsuccessful?"

Snape's lip curled.

"Obviously."

Professor Umbridge scribbled on her clipboard.

"And you have applied regularly for the Defense Against the Dark Arts post since you first joined the school, I believe?"

"Yes," said Snape quietly, barely moving his lips. He looked very angry.

"Do you have any idea why Dumbledore has consistently refused to appoint you?" asked Umbridge.

"I suggest you ask him," said Snape jerkily.

"Oh I shall," said Professor Umbridge with a sweet smile.

"I suppose this is relevant?" Snape asked, his black eyes

narrowed.

“Oh yes,” said Professor Umbridge. “Yes, the Ministry wants a thorough understanding of teachers’ — er — backgrounds . . .”

She turned away, walked over to Pansy Parkinson and began questioning her about the lessons. Snape looked around at Harry and their eyes met for a second. Harry hastily dropped his gaze to his potion, which was now congealing foully and giving off a strong smell of burned rubber.

“No marks again, then, Potter,” said Snape maliciously, emptying Harry’s cauldron with a wave of his wand. “You will write me an essay on the correct composition of this potion, indicating how and why you went wrong, to be handed in next lesson, do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Harry furiously. Snape had already given them homework, and he had Quidditch practice this evening; this would mean another couple of sleepless nights. It did not seem possible that he had awoken that morning feeling very happy. All he felt now was a fervent desire for this day to end as soon as possible.

“Maybe I’ll skive off Divination,” he said glumly as they stood again in the courtyard after lunch, the wind whipping at the hems of robes and brims of hats. “I’ll pretend to be ill and do Snape’s essay instead, then I won’t have to stay up half the night . . .”

“You can’t skive off Divination,” said Hermione severely.

“Hark who’s talking, you walked out of Divination, you hate Trelawney!” said Ron indignantly.

“I don’t *hate* her,” said Hermione loftily. “I just think she’s an absolutely appalling teacher and a real old fraud. . . . But Harry’s

already missed History of Magic and I don't think he ought to miss anything else today!"

There was too much truth in this to ignore, so half an hour later Harry took his seat in the hot, over-perfumed atmosphere of the Divination classroom feeling angry at everybody. Professor Trelawney was handing out copies of *The Dream Oracle* yet again; he would surely be much better employed doing Snape's punishment essay than sitting here trying to find meaning in a lot of made-up dreams.

It seemed, however, that he was not the only person in Divination who was in a temper. Professor Trelawney slammed a copy of the *Oracle* down on the table between Harry and Ron and swept away, her lips pursed; she threw the next copy of the *Oracle* at Seamus and Dean, narrowly avoiding Seamus's head, and thrust the final one into Neville's chest with such force that he slipped off his pouf.

"Well, carry on!" said Professor Trelawney loudly, her voice high pitched and somewhat hysterical. "You know what to do! Or am I such a substandard teacher that you have never learned how to open a book?"

The class stared perplexedly at her and then at each other. Harry, however, thought he knew what was the matter. As Professor Trelawney flounced back to the high-backed teacher's chair, her magnified eyes full of angry tears, he leaned his head closer to Ron's and muttered, "I think she's got the results of her inspection back."

"Professor?" said Parvati Patil in a hushed voice (she and Lavender had always rather admired Professor Trelawney). "Professor, is there anything — er — wrong?"

“Wrong!” cried Professor Trelawney in a voice throbbing with emotion. “Certainly not! I have been insulted, certainly. Insinuations have been made against me. . . . Unfounded accusations levelled . . . but no, there is nothing wrong, certainly not. . . .”

She took a great shuddering breath and looked away from Parvati, angry tears spilling from under her glasses.

“I say nothing,” she choked, “of sixteen years’ devoted service. It has passed, apparently, unnoticed. . . . But I shall not be insulted, no, I shall not!”

“But Professor, who’s insulting you?” asked Parvati timidly.

“The establishment!” said Professor Trelawney in a deep, dramatic, wavering voice. “Yes, those with eyes too clouded by the Mundane to See as I See, to Know as I Know . . . Of course, we Seers have always been feared, always persecuted. . . . It is — alas — our fate”

She gulped, dabbed at her wet cheeks with the end of her shawl, and then pulled a small, embroidered handkerchief from her sleeve, into which she blew her nose very hard with a sound like Peeves blowing a raspberry. Ron sniggered. Lavender shot him a disgusted look.

“Professor,” said Parvati, “do you mean . . . is it something Professor Umbridge . . . ?”

“Do not speak to me about that woman!” cried Professor Trelawney, leaping to her feet, her beads rattling and her spectacles flashing. “Kindly continue with your work!”

And she spent the rest of the lesson striding among them, tears still leaking from behind her glasses, muttering what sounded like threats

under her breath.

“ . . . may well choose to leave . . . the indignity of it . . . on probation . . . we shall see . . . how she dares . . . ”

“You and Umbridge have got something in common,” Harry told Hermione quietly when they met again in Defense Against the Dark Arts. “She obviously reckons Trelawney’s an old fraud too. . . . Looks like she’s put her on probation.”

Umbridge entered the room as he spoke, wearing her black velvet bow and an expression of great smugness.

“Good afternoon, class.”

“Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge,” they chanted drearily.

“Wands away, please . . . ”

But there was no answering flurry of movement this time; nobody had bothered to take out their wands.

“Please turn to page thirty-four of *Defensive Magical Theory* and read the third chapter, entitled ‘The Case for Non-Offensive Responses to Magical Attack.’ There will be —”

“— no need to talk,” Harry, Ron, and Hermione said together under their breaths.

“No Quidditch practice,” said Angelina in hollow tones when Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the common room that night after dinner.

“But I kept my temper!” said Harry, horrified. “I didn’t say anything to her, Angelina, I swear, I —”

“I know, I know,” said Angelina miserably. “She just said she needed a bit of time to consider.”

“Consider what?” said Ron angrily. “She’s given the Slytherins permission, why not us?”

But Harry could imagine how much Umbridge was enjoying holding the threat of no Gryffindor Quidditch team over their heads and could easily understand why she would not want to relinquish that weapon over them too soon.

“Well,” said Hermione, “look on the bright side — at least now you’ll have time to do Snape’s essay!”

“That’s a bright side, is it?” snapped Harry, while Ron stared incredulously at Hermione. “No Quidditch practice and extra Potions?”

Harry slumped down into a chair, dragged his Potions essay reluctantly from his bag, and set to work.

It was very hard to concentrate; even though he knew that Sirius was not due in the fire until much later he could not help glancing into the flames every few minutes just in case. There was also an incredible amount of noise in the room: Fred and George appeared finally to have perfected one type of Skiving Snackbox, which they were taking turns to demonstrate to a cheering and whooping crowd.

First, Fred would take a bite out of the orange end of a chew, at which he would vomit spectacularly into a bucket they had placed in front of them. Then he would force down the purple end of the chew, at which the vomiting would immediately cease. Lee Jordan, who was assisting the demonstration, was lazily vanishing the vomit at regular intervals with the same Vanishing Spell Snape kept using on Harry’s potions.

What with the regular sounds of retching, cheering, and Fred and

George taking advance orders from the crowd, Harry was finding it exceptionally difficult to focus on the correct method for Strengthening Solutions. Hermione was not helping matters; the cheers and sound of vomit hitting the bottom of Fred and George's bucket were punctuated by loud and disapproving sniffs that Harry found, if anything, more distracting.

"Just go and stop them, then!" he said irritably, after crossing out the wrong weight of powdered griffin claw for the fourth time.

"I can't, they're not *technically* doing anything wrong," said Hermione through gritted teeth. "They're quite within their rights to eat the foul things themselves, and I can't find a rule that says the other idiots aren't entitled to buy them, not unless they're proven to be dangerous in some way, and it doesn't look as though they are . . ."

She, Harry, and Ron watched George projectile-vomit into the bucket, gulp down the rest of the chew, and straighten up, beaming with his arms wide to protracted applause.

"You know, I don't get why Fred and George only got three O.W.L.s each," said Harry, watching as Fred, George, and Lee collected gold from the eager crowd. "They really know their stuff . . ."

"Oh, they only know flashy stuff that's no real use to anyone," said Hermione disparagingly.

"No real use?" said Ron in a strained voice. "Hermione, they've got about twenty-six Galleons already . . ."

It was a long while before the crowd around the Weasleys dispersed, and then Fred, Lee, and George sat up counting their takings even longer, so that it was well past midnight when Harry,

Ron, and Hermione finally had the common room to themselves again. At long last, Fred closed the doorway to the boys' dormitories behind him, rattling his box of Galleons ostentatiously so that Hermione scowled. Harry, who was making very little progress with his Potions essay, decided to give it up for the night. As he put his books away, Ron, who was dozing lightly in an armchair, gave a muffled grunt, awoke, looked blearily into the fire and said, "Sirius!"

Harry whipped around; Sirius's untidy dark head was sitting in the fire again.

"Hi," he said, grinning.

"Hi," chorused Harry, Ron, and Hermione, all three kneeling down upon the hearthrug. Crookshanks purred loudly and approached the fire, trying, despite the heat, to put his face close to Sirius's.

"How're things?" said Sirius.

"Not that good," said Harry, as Hermione pulled Crookshanks back to stop him singeing his whiskers. "The Ministry's forced through another decree, which means we're not allowed to have Quidditch teams —"

"— or secret Defense Against the Dark Arts groups?" said Sirius.

There was a short pause.

"How did you know about that?" Harry demanded.

"You want to choose your meeting places more carefully," said Sirius, grinning still more broadly. "The Hog's Head, I ask you. . ."

"Well, it was better than the Three Broomsticks!" said Hermione defensively. "That's always packed with people —"

"— which means you'd have been harder to overhear," said Sirius. "You've got a lot to learn, Hermione."

“Who overheard us?” Harry demanded.

“Mundungus, of course,” said Sirius, and when they all looked puzzled he laughed. “He was the witch under the veil.”

“That was Mundungus?” Harry said, stunned. “What was he doing in the Hog’s Head?”

“What do you think he was doing?” said Sirius impatiently. “Keeping an eye on you, of course.”

“I’m still being followed?” asked Harry angrily.

“Yeah, you are,” said Sirius, “and just as well, isn’t it, if the first thing you’re going to do on your weekend off is organize an illegal defense group.”

But he looked neither angry nor worried; on the contrary, he was looking at Harry with distinct pride.

“Why was Dung hiding from us?” asked Ron, sounding disappointed. “We’d’ve liked to’ve seen him.”

“He was banned from the Hog’s Head twenty years ago,” said Sirius, “and that barman’s got a long memory. We lost Moody’s spare Invisibility Cloak when Sturgis was arrested, so Dung’s been dressing as a witch a lot lately. . . . Anyway . . . First of all, Ron — I’ve sworn to pass on a message from your mother.”

“Oh yeah?” said Ron, sounding apprehensive.

“She says on no account whatsoever are you to take part in an illegal secret Defense Against the Dark Arts group. She says you’ll be expelled for sure and your future will be ruined. She says there will be plenty of time to learn how to defend yourself later and that you are too young to be worrying about that right now. She also” — Sirius’s eyes turned to the other two — “advises Harry and

Hermione not to proceed with the group, though she accepts that she has no authority over either of them and simply begs them to remember that she has their best interests at heart. She would have written all this to you, but if the owl had been intercepted you'd all have been in real trouble, and she can't say it for herself because she's on duty tonight."

"On duty doing what?" said Ron quickly.

"Never you mind, just stuff for the Order," said Sirius. "So it's fallen to me to be the messenger and make sure you tell her I passed it all on, because I don't think she trusts me to."

There was another pause in which Crookshanks, mewling, attempted to paw Sirius's head, and Ron fiddled with a hole in the hearthrug.

"So you want me to say I'm not going to take part in the defense group?" he muttered finally.

"Me? Certainly not!" said Sirius, looking surprised. "I think it's an excellent idea!"

"You do?" said Harry, his heart lifting.

"Of course I do!" said Sirius. "D'you think your father and I would've lain down and taken orders from an old hag like Umbridge?"

"But — last term all you did was tell me to be careful and not take risks —"

"Last year all the evidence was that someone inside Hogwarts was trying to kill you, Harry!" said Sirius impatiently. "This year we know that there's someone outside Hogwarts who'd like to kill us all, so I think learning to defend yourselves properly is a very good

idea!”

“And if we do get expelled?” Hermione asked, a quizzical look on her face.

“Hermione, this whole thing was your idea!” said Harry, staring at her.

“I know it was. . . . I just wondered what Sirius thought,” she said, shrugging.

“Well, better expelled and able to defend yourselves than sitting safely in school without a clue,” said Sirius.

“Hear, hear,” said Harry and Ron enthusiastically.

“So,” said Sirius, “how are you organizing this group? Where are you meeting?”

“Well, that’s a bit of a problem now,” said Harry. “Dunno where we’re going to be able to go . . .”

“How about the Shrieking Shack?” suggested Sirius.

“Hey, that’s an idea!” said Ron excitedly, but Hermione made a skeptical noise and all three of them looked at her, Sirius’s head turning in the flames.

“Well, Sirius, it’s just that there were only four of you meeting in the Shrieking Shack when you were at school,” said Hermione, “and all of you could transform into animals and I suppose you could all have squeezed under a single Invisibility Cloak if you’d wanted to. But there are twenty-eight of us and none of us is an Animagus, so we wouldn’t need so much an Invisibility Cloak as an Invisibility Marquee —”

“Fair point,” said Sirius, looking slightly crestfallen. “Well, I’m sure you’ll come up with somewhere. . . . There used to be a pretty

roomy secret passageway behind that big mirror on the fourth floor, you might have enough space to practice jinxes in there —”

“Fred and George told me it’s blocked,” said Harry, shaking his head. “Caved in or something.”

“Oh . . .” said Sirius, frowning. “Well, I’ll have a think and get back to —”

He broke off. His face was suddenly tense, alarmed. He turned sideways, apparently looking into the solid brick wall of the fireplace.

“Sirius?” said Harry anxiously.

But he had vanished. Harry gaped at the flames for a moment, then turned to look at Ron and Hermione.

“Why did he — ?”

Hermione gave a horrified gasp and leapt to her feet, still staring at the fire.

A hand had appeared amongst the flames, groping as though to catch hold of something; a stubby, short-fingered hand covered in ugly old-fashioned rings. . . .

The three of them ran for it; at the door of the boys’ dormitory Harry looked back. Umbridge’s hand was still making snatching movements amongst the flames, as though she knew exactly where Sirius’s hair had been moments before and was determined to seize it.

Opvoedkundige Dekreet Nommer Vier-en-twintig

Daardie naweek voel Harry gelukkiger as ooit gedurende die kwartaal. Hy en Ron gebruik die grootste deel van die Sondag om hul agterstallige huiswerk in te haal. Hoewel dit nie juis pret is nie, skyn die laaste herfssoon nog en in stede van die geselskamer neem hulle hul boeke buitentoe en gaan sit langs die meer in die skaduwee van 'n groot berkeboom. Hermien, wie se werk natuurlik op datum is, neem wol saam en toor haar breipenne sodat hulle in die lug langs haar kletter en klik en nog hoede en serpe voortbring.

Dis vir Harry geweldig bevredigend om daaraan te dink dat hulle hul teen Umbridge en die Ministerie verset en dat hy 'n sleutelrol in hierdie rebellie speel. Hy herleef Saterdag se vergadering oor en oor in sy gedagtes: al die mense wat gekom het om Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste by hom te leer . . . hoe hulle gesigte gelyk het toe hulle hoor wat hy al alles gedoen het . . . en Cho wat sy optrede in die Drietowenaarstoernooi prys. Die besef dat hierdie mense hom nie as 'n leuenaar en frats beskou nie maar hom bewonder, beur hom so op dat hy die Maandagoggend nog steeds goed voel, al wag al sy goorste klasse op hom.

Toe hy en Ron uit hulle slaapsaal ondertoe stap, bespreek hulle Angelina se voorstel dat hulle daardie aand tydens die Kwiddiek-oefening aan die Greeprol-beweging moet werk. Hulle is al amper aan die oorkant van die sonverligte geselskamer toe hulle die groepie mense om die kennisgewingbord sien staan.

Daar pryk 'n groot kennisgewing teen die Griffindor-kennisgewingbord. Dit is só groot dat dit oor al die lyste van tweedehandse towerboeke wat te koop is, hang, asook Argus Fillis se nuwe aanmanings oor skoolreëls wat nagekom moet word, die Kwiddiek-span se oefenrooster, aanbiedinge om Sjokoladepaddakaarte uit te ruil, die Weasleys se jongste advertensie vir toetsers, die datums van Hogsmeade-naweke en notas oor verlore goedere. Die nuwe

kennisgewing is in groot swart letters gedruk. Aan die onderkant is 'n seël wat amptelik lyk en 'n netjiese, krullerige handtekening.

OP LAS VAN DIE HOË ONDERSOEKER BY HOGWARTS

Alle studenteorganisasies, -verenigings, -spanne, -groepe en -klubs word hiermee ontbind.

'n Organisasie, vereniging, span, groep of klub word hiermee gedefinieer as 'n gereelde saamtrek van drie of meer studente.

Toestemming om weer te vorm, moet by die Hoë Ondersoeker (professor Umbridge) verkry word.

Geen studenteorganisasie, -vereniging, -span, -groep of -klub mag sonder die toestemming en goedkeuring van die Hoë Ondersoeker bestaan nie.

Enige student wat 'n organisasie, vereniging, span, groep of klub vorm, of aan een behoort wat nie deur die Hoë Ondersoeker goedgekeur is nie, sal geshors word.

Bostaande is in ooreenstemming met Opvoedkundige Dekreet Nommer Vier-en-twintig.

Geteken: Dolores Jane Umbridge, Hoë Ondersoeker.

Harry en Ron lees die kennisgewing bo-oor die koppe van 'n paar tweedejaars.

"Beteken dit hulle gaan die Spoegklipklub toemaak?" vra een benoud.

"Ek sou sê die Spoegklippe sal oukei wees," sê Ron in 'n somber stem, sodat die tweedejaar wip van die skrik. "Ek dink nie ons gaan so gelukkig wees nie, en jy?" sê hy vir Harry toe die tweedejaars wegstap.

Harry lees die kennisgewing 'n tweede keer deur. Die gelukkige gevoel wat hy sedert Saterdag gehad het, het verdwyn. Hy brand van woede.

"Dis nie toevallig nie," sê hy en bal sy vuiste. "Sy weet."

"Sy kan nie," sê Ron dadelik.

"Daar was ander mense in die kroeg wat dalk geluister het. En komaan, ons weet nie watter van daardie studente ons kan vertrou nie. . . . Enigeen kon na Umbridge gehardloop en gaan klik het."

En hy het gedink almal glo hom, dat hulle hom selfs bewonder.

“Sagrys Smit!” sê Ron dadelik en slaan met sy vuus in sy hand. “Of – weet jy, daai Michael Corner het vir my so onderduims gelyk –”

Harry kyk na die deur wat na die meisies se slaapsale lei. “Ek wonder of Hermien dit al gesien het?”

“Kom ons gaan vertel haar.” Ron storm deur die vertrek, ruk die deur oop en storm met die wenteltrap op.

Hy is op die sesde treetjie toe die trappe met ’n skel toetgeluid skielik wegsmelt en ’n lang, gladde klipglybaan vorm. Ron hardloop ’n oomblik in die lug, sy arms draai wild soos ’n windmeul, dan tuimel hy agteroor, skiet op sy rug af ondertoe en kom tot rus voor Harry se voete.

“Hm – ek dink nie ons word in die meisies se slaapsale toegelaat nie,” sê Harry terwyl hy vir Ron ophelp en sy bes doen om nie te lag nie.

Twee vierdejaarmeisies gly blitsig met die glybaan af ondertoe. “Ooe, wie’t probeer inkom?” giggel hulle vrolik en loer na Harry en Ron.

“Ek,” sê Ron nog effens deur die wind. “Ek het nie geweet dit gaan gebeur nie. Dis nie regverdig nie!” sê hy vir Harry toe die giggelende meisies na die portretopening stap. “Hermien kom na ons slaapsaal, hoekom mag ons nie –?”

“Ag, dis ’n outydse reël,” sê Hermien, wat pas afgegely en netjies op die mat voor hulle tot stilstand gekom het. “Volgens *Die Geskiedenis van Hogwarts* het die stigters gereken hulle kan die seuns nie soveel soos die meisies vertrou nie. In elk geval, wat wou julle hê?”

“Vir jou – kyk hier!” Ron stuur haar na die kennisgewingbord.

Hermien se oë gly vinnig oor die kennisgewing. Haar gesig verstrak.

“Iemand het geklik!” sê Ron vies.

“Nee, hulle het nie,” sê Hermien sag.

“Jy is so naïef,” sê Ron, “jy dink omdat jy eerlik en betroubaar is –”

“Nee, hulle het nie, want ek het daardie perkament wat ons almal moes teken, getoor,” sê Hermien grimmig. “Glo my, as enigeen vir Umbridge gaan sê het, sal ons weet wie dit was en daardie een sal bitter spyt wees.”

“Wat sal met hulle gebeur?” vra Ron nuuskierig.

“Wel, kom ons stel dit so: Eloise Midgeon se aknee sal soos ’n paar oulike sproetjies lyk,” sê Hermien. “Kom ons gaan eet, dan kyk ons wat die ander mense dink... Ek wonder of dit in al die huise opgesit is?”

Toe hulle die Groot Saal binnestap, is dit onmiddellik duidelik dat Umbridge se kennisgewing nie tot die Griffindor-toring beperk is nie. Die mense in die Groot Saal praat harder as gewoonlik en loop tussen die tafels rond om die kennisgewing te bespreek. Harry, Ron en Hermien het skaars gaan sit toe Neville, Dean, Fred, George en Ginny op hulle toesak.

“Het julle dit gesien?”

“Dink julle sy weet?”

“Wat gaan ons doen?”

Almal kyk na Harry. Hy loer rond om seker te maak daar is geen onderwysers in die omgewing nie.

“Ons gaan voort, wat anders?” sê hy sag.

“Ek het geweet jy sal dit sê,” sê George en tik hom op sy arm.

“Die prefekte ook?” sê Fred en kyk vraend na Ron en Hermien.

“Natuurlik,” sê Hermien kil.

“Hier kom Ernie en Hanna Abbott.” Ron kyk oor sy skouer. “En daardie ouens van Raweklou en Smit . . . en niemand is vreeslik vol puisies nie.”

Hermien lyk hoogs bekommerd.

“Vergeet van die puisies, die idiote kan nie nou almal hierheen kom nie, dit sal baie verdag lyk – gaan sit!” sis sy vir Ernie en Hanna en wys benoud dat hulle na die Hoesenproes-tafel moet gaan. “Later! Ons – sal – later – met – julle – praat!”

Ginny swaai ongeduldig uit die bank. “Ek sal vir Michael gaan sê . . . die sot, regtig . . .” Sy stap haastig na die Raweklou-tafel.

Harry se oë volg haar. Cho sit nie ver daarvandaan nie. Sy gesels met haar vriendin met die krulhare wat saam met haar na Die Swynenes gekom het. Wat as Umbridge se kennisgewing veroorsaak dat Cho te bang is om weer te kom?

Maar hulle voel die volle impak van die kennisgewing eers toe hulle uit die Groot Saal na Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns stap.

“Harry! Ron!”

Dis Angelina. Sy hardloop vinnig nader en lyk radeloos.

“Dis oukei,” sê Harry toe sy naby genoeg is om hom te hoor, “ons gaan nog steeds –”

“Besef julle dat Kwiddiek hierby ingesluit is?” val Angelina hom in die rede. “Ons moet verlof vra vir die Griffindor-span!”

“Wat?” sê Harry.

“Dis malligheid!” sê Ron ontsteld.

“Gaan lees die kennisgewing, daar staan ook spanne! Hoor hier, Harry . . . ek sê dit vir die laaste keer . . . moet asseblief nie weer vir Umbridge kwaad maak nie. Sy kan ons verbied om te speel!”

“Oukei, oukei,” sê Harry. Angelina lyk of sy in trane gaan uitbars. “Moenie worrie nie, ek sal my gedra . . .”

“Ek wed Umbridge is in Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns,” sê Ron iesegrimmig toe hulle na Binns se klaskamer stap. “Sy’t nog nie vir Binns geïnspekteer nie, ek wed sy’s daar . . .”

Maar hy is verkeerd. Toe hulle instap, is professor Binns die enigste onderwyser. Hy sweef soos gewoonlik ’n entjie bo sy stoel terwyl hy hom voorberei om sy eentonige relaas oor die reuseoorloë voor te lees. Vandag probeër Harry nie eens luister nie. Hy sit en krabbel op sy perkament en ignoreer Hermien se herhaalde stampe en kwaai kyke, tot ’n besonder seer stamp in sy ribbes hom laat omkyk.

“Wat?”

Sy wys na die venster en Harry kyk soontoe. Hedwig sit op die smal lysie voor die venster met ’n rol aan haar been en staar deur die dik glas na hom. Harry kan dit nie verstaan nie. Hulle het pas ontbyt geëet, hoekom het sy nie toe die brief saam met die ander uile afgelewer nie?

Baie van sy klasmaats wys ook na Hedwig. “Ek is mal oor daardie uil, sy is so mooi,” koer Hildegard teenoor Parvati.

Harry kyk na waar professor Binns nog steeds sy notas lees, salig onbewus van die feit dat die klas nog minder as gewoonlik na hom luister. Harry glip stilletjies uit sy stoel en sluip gebukkend met die ry af na die venster. Hy skuif die skuiwer versigtig en maak die venster stadig oop.

Hy het verwag dat Hedwig haar been gaan uithou sodat hy die brief kan afhaal en sy na die Uilhuis kan vlieg, maar toe die venster oopgaan, hop sy in. Sy hoe-hoe droewig. Harry loer angstig na professor Binns voor hy die venster toemaak en met Hedwig op sy skouer gebukkend na sy sitplek draf. Hy gaan sit, haal Hedwig af en begin om die brief los te maak.

Toe eers sien hy hoe verfrommel Hedwig se vere is. Party is geknak en een vlerk staan teen ’n skewe hoek.

“Sy’t seergekry!” fluister hy en bekyk haar van naderby. Hermien en Ron leun ook nader en Hermien sit selfs haar veepe neer. “Kyk, daar’s fout met haar vlerk –”

Hedwig bewe en toe Harry sy hand na haar vlerk uitsteek, blaas sy haar op sodat haar vere pof en sy spring effens weg terwyl sy kwaai na hom gluur.

“Professor Binns,” sê Harry hard en almal in die klas kyk om. “Ek voel nie lekker nie.”

Professor Binns kyk op en lyk soos altyd verbaas toe hy die kamer vol mense voor hom sien.

“Voel nie lekker nie?” herhaal hy vaag.

“Glad nie,” sê Harry beslis. Hy staan op en steek vir Hedwig agter sy rug weg. “Ek dink ek moet siekeboeg toe gaan.”

“Ja,” sê professor Binns, wat duidelik onkant gevang is. “Ja, ja, siekeboeg. . . Wel, weg is jy, Perkins. . .”

Buite in die gang sit Harry vir Hedwig terug op sy skouer en stap haastig weg. Dis eers toe hy Binns se deur nie meer kan sien nie dat hy gaan staan. Sy eerste keuse om Hedwig gesond te maak, is natuurlik Hagrid, maar hy het nie ’n idee waar Hagrid op die oomblik is nie. Dus sal hy vir professor Growweblaar moet gaan soek en fluim vashou dat sy sal kan help.

Hy loer deur die venster na die winderige, bewolkte speelterrein. Sy is nie by Hagrid se hut nie. As sy nie klas gee nie, sal sy in die personeelkamer wees. Hy stap ondertoe. Hedwig swaai op sy skouer en hoe-hoe swakkies.

Aan weerskante van die personeelkamer se deur is twee klipdraakkoppe. Toe Harry nader stap, sê een kras: “Jy moet in die klas wees, boet.”

“Dis dringend,” sê Harry kortaf.

“Ooo, *dringend*, hm?” sê die ander draakkop in ’n skril stem. “Wel, dit sit ons op ons plek, nê?”

Harry klop. Hy hoor voetstappe, die deur gaan oop en professor McGonagall staan voor hom.

“Moet net nie vir my sê jy het weer detensie gekry nie!” sê sy dadelik en haar vierkantige brilglase flits kwaai.

“Nee, Professor!” sê Harry gou.

“Wel, hoekom is jy nie in die klas nie?”

“Dis *dringend*,” sê een draakkop smalend.

“Ek soek vir professor Growweblaar,” verduidelik Harry. “Dis my uil, sy’t seergekry.”

“’n Beseerde uil?” Professor Growweblaar verskyn langs professor McGonagall. Sy rook ’n pyp en hou ’n eksemplaar van die *Daaglikse Profeet* vas.

“Ja.” Harry haal vir Hedwig versigtig van sy skouer af. “Sy’t ná al die ander posuile gekom en haar vlerk lyk nie lekker nie, kyk –”

Professor Growweblaar byt haar pyp tussen haar tande vas en neem Hedwig by Harry terwyl professor McGonagall hulle dophou.

“Hmm.” Professor Growweblaar se pyp wikkel effens terwyl sy praat. “Lyk of iets haar aangeval het. Kan nie dink wat nie. Testralle val soms voëls aan, hoewel Hagrid Hogwarts se testralle geleer het om die uile uit te los.”

Harry weet nie wat testralle is nie en hy gee ook nie om nie. Al

wat saak maak, is of Hedwig gaan regkom of nie. Professor McGonagall kyk egter skerp na hom en vra: "Weet jy hoe ver hierdie uil gevlieg het, Potter?"

"Hm," sê Harry, "ek dink van Londen af."

Hy vang haar oog vlugtig en sien aan die manier waarop haar wenkbroue in die middel bymekaarkom dat sy begryp dat "Londen" eintlik "Grimmauldplein 12" beteken.

Professor Growweblaar haal 'n oogglas uit haar kleed, skroef dit in haar oog en bekyk Hedwig se vlerk van naderby. "Ek behoort dit reg te kry as jy haar by my sal los, Potter. Maar sy moet vir 'n paar dae nie lang afstande vlieg nie."

"Hm – oukei – dankie," sê Harry net toe die klok vir pouse lui.

"Net 'n oomblik, Wilhelmina!" sê professor McGonagall. "Potter se brief!"

"O ja!" Harry het skoon van die brief aan Hedwig se been vergeet. Professor Growweblaar gee dit vir hom en verdwyn dan met Hedwig in die personeelkamer. Harry voel skuldig toe hy omdraai en wegstap, want Hedwig het hom 'n baie verwyttende kyk gegee, asof sy nie kan glo dat hy haar somer weggee nie.

Professor McGonagall roep hom terug.

"Potter!"

"Ja, Professor?"

Sy kyk op en af in die gang. Daar kom studente van albei kante aan.

"Onthou," sê sy vinnig en gedemp, haar oë op die rol in sy hande, "die kommunikasiekanale in en uit Hogwarts word heel waarskynlik dopgehou."

"Ek –" begin Harry, maar die stroom studente in die gang is so te sê by hulle. Professor McGonagall knik kortaf en draai terug na die personeelkamer.

Harry word deur die skare meegesleur. Hy sien vir Ron en Hermien in 'n hoekie in die binnehof staan, hulle krae opgeslaan teen die wind. Hy skeur die rol oop terwyl hy haastig na hulle stap. Daar is vyf woorde in Sirius se handskrif.

Vandag, selfde tyd, selfde plek.

"Is Hedwig oukei?" vra Hermien angstig die oomblik toe hy binne hoorafstand is.

"Wat het jy met haar gemaak?" vra Ron.

"Vir Growweblaar gegee. En McGonagall was ook daar . . . luister . . ." Hy vertel vir hulle wat professor McGonagall vir hom gese het. Tot sy verbasing lyk hulle nie geskok nie. Inteendeel, hulle kyk betekenisvol na mekaar.

"Wat?" sê Harry terwyl hy van Ron na Hermien en terug kyk.

“Wel, ek het nou net vir Ron gesê . . . wat as iemand vir Hedwig probeer onderskep het? Ek bedoel, sy’t nog nooit tevore seergekry nie.”

“Van wie kom die brief in elk geval?” vra Ron en neem dit by Harry.

“Snuffels,” sê Harry sag.

“Selfde tyd, selfde plek? Is dit nou die vuur in die geselskamer?”

“Wat anders?” sê Hermien toe sy ook die nota lees. Sy lyk onrustig. “Ek hoop nie nog iemand het dit gelees nie . . .”

“Dit was verseël en alles,” sê Harry asof hy homself en haar probeer oortuig. “En niemand sal tog kan raai wat hy bedoel as hulle nie weet waar ons die vorige keer met hom gepraat het nie, of hoe?”

“Ek weet nie,” sê Hermien bekommerd. Sy hys haar sak oor haar skouer toe die klok weer lui. “Dis nie so moeilik om dit weer toe te toor nie . . . en as iemand die Floo-netwerk dophou . . . Maar ek weet nie hoe ons hom kan waarsku om nie te kom sonder dat dit ook onderskep word nie!”

Hulle stap met die kliptrappe af na die kerker vir Towerdrankies. Al drie is diep ingedagte, maar toe hulle onder kom, ruk Draco Malfoy se stem hulle uit hul dwaal. Hy staan voor Snerp se klas-kamerdeur en waai ’n stuk perkament wat amptelik lyk deur die lug terwyl hy baie harder praat as wat nodig is, sodat almal in die gang elke woord kan hoor.

“Ja, Umbridge het onmiddellik gesê die Slibberin-span mag voortgaan toe ek haar vanoggend gaan vra het. Dit was ’n blote formaliteit, ek bedoel sy ken vir Vader baie goed, hy’s altyd in en uit by die Ministerie . . . Dit sal interessant wees om te sien of Griffindor nog mag speel.”

“Moenie kwaad word nie,” fluister Hermien dringend vir Harry en Ron, wat albei met gebalde vuiste en strak gesigte na Malfoy staar. “Dis wat hy wil hê.”

“Ek bedoel,” sê Malfoy en hy praat nog harder terwyl sy grys oë gemeen na Harry en Ron flikker, “as dit ’n geval is van invloed by die Ministerie, dink ek nie hulle het ’n kans nie. Volgens Vader soek hulle al jare ’n rede om vir Arthur Weasley uit te skop . . . En daardie Potter . . . Vader sê dis net ’n kwessie van tyd voor die Ministerie hom na St. Mungo stuur. Blykbaar het hulle daar ’n spesiale saal vir mense wie se verstand deur toorkuns aangetas is.”

Malfoy trek ’n afskuwelike gesig met sy mond wat oophang en sy oë wat wild rol. Krabbe en Goliath snorklag en Pansy Parkinson skree van plesier.

Iets bots teen Harry se skouer en stamp hom uit die pad. ’n

Oomblik later besef hy dis Neville wat verby hom gestorm het en reg op Malfoy afpyl.

"Neville, nee!"

Harry spring vorentoe en gryp die agterkant van Neville se kleed. Neville sit hom met swaaiende vuiste teë en doen sy bes om vir Malfoy te moker, wat vir 'n oomblik erg geskok lyk.

"Hêlp my!" skree Harry vir Ron. Hy kry dit reg om sy arm om Neville se nek te slaan en hom van die Slibberins af weg te trek. Krabbe en Goliat bult hul spiere en gaan staan voor Malfoy, gereed om te baklei. Ron pak Neville se arms beet en hy en Harry sleep hom na die Griffindor-ry. Neville se gesig is bloedrooi. Harry het hom so stewig om die nek beet dat hy nie behoorlik kan praat nie, maar 'n paar woorde sputter oor sy lippe.

"Nie . . . snaaks . . . moenie . . . Mungo . . . hom . . . wys."

Die kerkerdeur gaan oop en Snerp verskyn. Sy swart oë swiep oor die Griffindor-ry na Harry en Ron wat nog met Neville stoei.

"'n Bakleiere, Potter, Weasley, Loggerenberg?" sê Snerp se koue, snedige stem. "Tien punte van Griffindor. Laat los vir Loggerenberg, Potter, of dis detensie vir jou. Stap in, almal van julle."

Harry los vir Neville, wat hygend na hom gluur.

"Ek moes jou keer," sê Harry en tel sy sak op. "Krabbe en Goliat sal jou uitmekaar skeur."

Neville antwoord nie. Hy tel net sy eie sak op en stap die kerker binne.

"Waaroor in die naam van Merlin," sê Ron stadig toe hulle agter Neville aanstap, "het dit gegaan?"

Harry antwoord nie. Hy weet hoekom die onderwerp van St. Mungo, waar mense met toorskade aan hul breine opgeneem word, vir Neville so pynlik is, maar hy het vir Dompeldorius belowe om vir niemand te vertel nie. Selfs Neville weet nie dat Harry sy geheim ken nie.

Harry, Ron en Hermien gaan sit op hul gewone plekke agter in die klas en haal perkament, veerpenne en hul eksemplare van *Eenduisend Magiese Kruie en Swamme* uit. Om hulle fluister die klas oor Neville se vreemde optrede, maar toe Snerp die kerkerdeur galmend toeslaan, bly almal dadelik stil.

"Julle het seker agtergekom," sê Snerp in sy honende stem, "dat ons vandag 'n besoeker het."

Hy wys na 'n skemer hoek van die kerker en Harry sien vir professor Umbridge met haar aanknipbord op haar knie. Hy kyk sydelings na Ron en Hermien met geligte wenkbroue. Snerp en Umbridge, die twee onderwysers wat hy die meeste haat. Dis moei-

lik om te besluit watter een hy wil hê die ander een moet laat les opdra.

"Ons gaan vandag voort met die Versterkingsoplossing. Julle meergesels is nog net soos julle dit na die vorige les gelaat het. Indien korrek aangemaak, sal dit oor die naweek goed verouder het. Die instruksies –" hy swaai weer sy towerstaf – "is op die bord. Gaan voort."

lydens die eerste halfuur van die les sit professor Umbridge in haar hoek en maak notas. Harry wil graag hoor wat sy vir Snerp vra – só graag dat hy weer agtelosig raak met sy towerdrankie.

"Salamanderbloed, Harry!" kreun Hermien en gryp sy arm om te keer dat hy 'n derde keer die verkeerde bestanddeel byvoeg, "nie granaatsap nie!"

"O . . . ja . . ." Harry sit die bottel neer, maar hou die hoek nog steeds dop. Umbridge het opgestaan. "Hal!" sê hy gedemp toe sy tussen twee rye banke deur na Snerp stap, wat oor Dean Thomas se hekseketel buk.

"Wel, dit lyk of die klas redelik gevorderd is vir hul vlak," sê sy flink vir Snerp se rug. "Maar ek wonder of dit raadsaam is om hulle te leer om Versterkingsdrankies te maak. Ek dink die Ministerie sal verkies dat dit van die leerplan geskrap word."

Snerp kom stadig orent en draai na haar.

"Nou . . . vir hoe lank gee jy al klas by Hogwarts?" vra sy, haar veeperen gereed bo die aanknipbord.

"Veertien jaar," antwoord Snerp. Sy gesig is onpeilbaar. Harry hou hom stip dop terwyl hy 'n paar druppels by sy towerdrankie voeg. Dit sis onheilspellend en verander van turkoois na oranje.

"Ek verneem jy het aanvanklik vir die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-pos aansoek gedoen?" gaan Umbridge voort.

"Ja," sê Snerp sag.

"Maar jy was nie suksesvol nie?"

Snerp se lip krul.

"Klaarblyklik nie."

Professor Umbridge skryf iets op haar aanknipbord.

"En jy doen glo gereeld aansoek vir die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-pos sedert jy by die skool aangesluit het?"

"Ja," sê Snerp sag. Sy lippe roer skaars en hy lyk smoorkwaad.

"Het jy enige idee hoekom Dompeldorius konsekwent weier om jou aan te stel?" vra Umbridge.

"Ek stel voor dat jy hom vra," sê Snerp rukkerig.

"O, ek sal," sê Umbridge met 'n soet glimlaggie.

"Ek neem aan dit is relevant?" Snerp se swart oë vernou.

“O ja,” sê professor Umbridge, “ja, die Ministerie wil ’n deeglike begrip vorm van die onderwysers se – hm – agtergrond.”

Sy draai om, stap na Pansy Parkinson en begin om haar oor die lesse uit te vra. Snerp kyk om en sy en Harry se oë ontmoet vir ’n sekonde. Harry kyk vinnig weg. Sy towerdrankie het aaklig dik geword en ruik soos gebrande rubber.

“Weer geen punte nie, Potter,” sê Snerp gemeen en maak Harry se hekseketel met ’n swiep van sy towerstaf leeg. “Vir die volgende klas sal jy ’n opstel oor die korrekte samestelling van hierdie towerdrankie skryf en aandui hoekom en waar jy gefouteer het, het jy dit?”

“Ja,” sê Harry woedend. Snerp het reeds vir hulle huiswerk gegee en hy het vanaand ’n Kwiddiekoefening. Dit beteken hy moet nóg ’n paar nagte wakker bly. Dis moeilik om te glo dat hy gelukkig gevoel het toe hy vanoggend opgestaan het. Hy wens vurig die dag was al verby.

“Dalk moet ek Waarsêery afvat,” sê hy bedruk toe hulle ná middagete in die binnehof staan en die wind om klede se some en hoede se rande sny. “Ek sal maak of ek siek is en eerder Snerp se opstel doen, dan hoef ek nie die helfte van die nag wakker te bly nie.”

“Jy kan nie Waarsêery mis nie,” sê Hermien streng.

“Hoor wie praat,” raas Ron. “Jy’t uit Waarsêery geloop, jy haat vir Trelawney!”

“Ek haat haar nie,” sê Hermien uit die hoogte. “Ek dink net sy’s ’n absoluut patetiese onderwyser en ’n regte ou bedrieër. Maar Harry het al klaar Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns gemis en ek dink nie hy moet nog iets vandag mis nie.”

Daar steek te veel waarheid hierin om dit te ignoreer en ’n halfuur later sit Harry op sy plek in die warm, sterk geparfumeerde Waarsêery-klas terwyl hy vir almal kwaad is. Professor Trelawney deel nogmaals *Die Droomorakel* uit en Harry wens hy kon eerder Snerp se strafopstel doen as om hier te sit en uitwerk wat ’n spul opgemaakte drome beteken.

Hy is nie die enigste een in Waarsêery wat in ’n slegte bui is nie. Professor Trelawney plak ’n eksemplaar van die *Orakel* op die tafel tussen Harry en Ron neer en swiep weg met dun lippe. Sy gooi die volgende een na Septimus en Dean en mis Septimus se kop net-net. Die laaste een druk sy met soveel geweld teen Neville se bors vas dat hy van sy poef afgly.

“Wel, gaan voort, julle weet wat om te doen!” sê sy hard. Haar stem klink skril en effens histories. “Of is ek so ’n swak onderwyser dat julle nog nooit geleer het om ’n boek oop te maak nie?”

Die klas kyk verward na haar en dan na mekaar. Harry dink hy weet wat verkeerd is. Terwyl professor Trelawney na haar hoërugstoel stap, haar vergrote oë vol tranen, leun hy oor na Ron en mompelt: "Sy't seker die uitslag van haar inspeksie gekry."

"Professor?" sê Parvati Patel besorg (sy en Hildegard het nog altyd vir professor Trelawney bewonder), "Professor, is iets verkeerd?"

"Verkeerd!" skree professor Trelawney en haar stem tril van emosie. "Beslis nie! Ek is beledig, ja . . . insinuasies word gemaak . . . ongegronde beskuldigings geslinger . . . maar nee, niks is verkeerd nie, beslis nie!"

Sy haal sidderend asem en toe sy wegkyk, rol tranen onder haar bril uit.

"Ek sal niks sê," stik sy, "van sestien jaar se toegewyde diens nie . . . dit het skynbaar onopgemerk verbygegaan . . . maar ek laat my nie beledig nie, nee, beslis nie!"

"Maar Professor, wie het vir u beledig?" vra Parvati hees.

"Die Establishment!" sê professor Trelawney in 'n diep, dramatiese, bewende stem. "Ja, diegene wie se oë te benewel is deur die ordinêre om te sien wat ek sien, te weet wat ek weet . . . Natuurlik is Sieners nog altyd gevrees, altyd vervolgt . . . dit is – helaas – ons lot."

Sy sluk en druk-druk die punt van haar sjaal teen haar nat wange. Dan trek sy 'n geborduurde sakdoekie uit haar mou en blaas haar neus so hard dat dit klink soos Nurks wat iemand koggel.

Ron giggel en Hildegard kyk vererg na hom.

"Professor," sê Parvati, "bedoel u . . . is dit iets wat professor Umbridge –?"

"Moenie met my oor daardie vrou praat nie!" skree professor Trelawney en spring met klingelende krale en flitsende brilglaseorent. "Gaan asseblief voort met julle werk!"

Die res van die les loop sy tussen hulle rond en prewel dreigemente terwyl die tranen agter haar brilglase uitloop.

" . . . kan net sowel loop . . . die onwaardigheid . . . op proef . . . ons sal sien . . . hoe durf sy . . ."

"Jy en Umbridge het iets gemeen," sê Harry saggies vir Hermien toe hulle by Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste aankom. "Dit lyk of sy ook dink Trelawney is 'n bedrieër . . . blykbaar is sy op proef . . ."

Net toe kom Umbridge die klas binne. Sy dra haar swart fluweelhaarstrik en lyk baie in haar skik met haarself.

"Goeiemiddag, klas."

"Goeiemiddag, professor Umbridge," sê hulle in 'n koor.

"Towerstawwe weg, asseblief."

Niemand roer nie. Niemand het die moeite gedoen om hul towerstawwe uit te haal nie.

"Blaai asseblief na bladsy vier-en-dertig van *Die Teorie van die Verdedigingstoorkuns* en lees die derde hoofstuk getitel "*Die saak vir nieaanvallende response op toweraanvalle*". Dis nie nodig –"

"– om te praat nie," mompel Harry, Ron en Hermien tegelyk.

"Geen Kwiddiekoefening nie," sê Angelina in 'n hol stem toe Harry, Ron en Hermien daardie aand ná ete in die geselskamer kom.

"Maar ek het nie my humeur verloor nie!" sê Harry geskok. "Ek het niks vir haar gesê nie, Angelina, ek sweer!"

"Ek weet, ek weet," sê Angelina mistroostig. "Sy't gesê sy't tyd nodig om dit te oorweeg."

"Wat te oorweeg?" sê Ron verontwaardig. "Sy't vir die Slibberins verlof gegee, hoekom nie vir ons nie?"

Maar Harry kan hom voorstel hoe lekker dit vir Umbridge moet wees om die Griffindor-kwiddiekspan te dreig en hy verstaan baie goed hoekom sy hierdie wapen nie sommer gou sal prysgee nie.

"Wel," sê Hermien, "kom ons kyk na die blink kant: ten minste het jy nou tyd om Snerp se opstel te doen."

"Dis die blink kant?" snou Harry terwyl Ron ongelowig na Hermien staar. "Geen Kwiddiek nie en ekstra Towerdrankies?"

Harry val in sy stoel neer, haal sy opstel oor Towerdrankies traag uit sy sak en begin werk. Dis moeilik om te konsentreer en hoewel hy goed weet dat Sirius eers baie later in die vuur sal wees, kyk hy elke nou en dan soontoe. Die vertrek is ook ontsettend raserig: Fred en George het uiteindelik een soort Stokkiesdraaisnoepie vervolmaak en demonstreer dit om die beurt aan 'n juigende groep mense.

Eers vat Fred 'n hap uit die oranje deel en vomeer dan met oorgawe in 'n emmer voor hom. Dan forseer hy die pers deel in en hou onmiddellik op met vomeer. Lee Jordaan, wat met die demonstrasie moet help, toor die braaksel elke nou en dan weg met dieselfde Verdwyntowerspreuk wat Snerp vir Harry se towerdrankies gebruik.

Die opgooiery, gejuig en geskree terwyl Fred en George bestellings neem, is só erg dat Harry nie op die korrekte metode vir Versterkingsoplossings kan konsentreer nie. Hermien help ook nie. Elke keer dat die braaksel die emmer se boom tref, snuif sy hard en afkeurend. Dit vind Harry lei sy aandag nog meer af.

"Nou maar sê hulle moet ophou!" sê hy ergerlik toe hy die verkeerde hoeveelheid verpoeierde griffioenklou die vierde keer uitkrap.

“Ek kan nie. Tegnies doen hulle niks verkeerd nie,” sê Hermien deur knersende tande. “Dis binne hulle reg om daardie vieslike goed self te eet en ek kry nêrens ’n reël wat sê die ander sotte mag dit nie koop nie. Tensy jy kan bewys dis op die een of ander manier gevaarlik, en dit lyk nie of dit is nie.”

Sy, Harry en Ron kyk hoe George in die emmer met ’n boog braak, die res van die lekker verslind en stralend orent kom; sy arms oopgegooi vir die langdurige applous.

“Weet jy, ek verstaan nie hoe Fred en George net drie Uile elk gekry het nie,” sê Harry terwyl hy kyk hoe Fred, George en Lee goud van die gretige toeskouers insamel. “Hulle weet wat hulle doen, hoor.”

“Ag, hulle ken net afwyserige goed wat niks werd is nie,” sê Hermien neerhalend.

“Niks werd nie?” sê Ron verontwaardig. “Hermien, hulle het reeds omtrent ses-en-twintig Galjoene ingesamel.”

Dit neem lank voor die skare om die Weasley-tweeling verdwyn het en nog langer vir Fred, George en Lee om hul goud te tel. Dis ná middernag toe Harry, Ron en Hermien eindelijk alleen in die geselskamer is. Toe Fred die deur na die seuns se slaapsale toetrek, ratel hy die doos Galjoene vermakerig sodat Hermien kwaai frons. Harry, wat nie eintlik met sy Towerdrankie-opstel gevorder het nie, besluit om die stryd gewonne te gee.

Terwyl hy sy boeke wegpak, gee Ron, wat in ’n leunstoel sit en slaap, ’n gesmoorde snork, skrik wakker en loer slaperig na die vuur.

“Sirius!” sê hy.

Harry vlieg om. Sirius se deurmekaar swart kop sit tussen die vlamme.

“Hallo,” sê hy en grinnik.

“Hallo,” sê Harry, Ron en Hermien in ’n koor en al drie kniel op die mat voor die vuur terwyl Kromskeen spinnend nader kom.

“Hoe gaan dit?” vra Sirius.

“Nie so goed nie,” sê Harry terwyl Hermien vir Kromskeen uit die pad stoot om te keer dat hy sy snorbaarde skroei. “Die Ministerie het nog ’n dekreet gemaak en dit beteken ons mag nie meer ’n Kwiddieksplan hê nie –”

“Of geheime Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-groepe nie?” sê Sirius.

Dis ’n oomblik stil.

“Hoe weet jy dit?” vra Harry.

“Julle moet julle vergaderings beter beplan,” sê Sirius en lag nog breër. “Die Swynenes van alle plekke!”

“Wel, dis beter as die Drie Besemstokke!” sê Hermien. “Dis altyd vol mense –”

“Wat beteken dis moeiliker om af te luister,” sê Sirius. “Jy het nog baie om te leer, Hermien.”

“Wie het afgeluister?” vra Harry.

“Mundungus, natuurlik.” Sirius lag vir hul verwarde gesigte. “Die heks met die sjaal.”

“Dit was Mundungus?” sê Harry geskok. “Wat het hy in Die Swynenes gesoek?”

“Wat dink jy?” sê Sirius ongeduldig. “Hy hou ’n ogie oor jou.”

“Ek word nog steeds gevolg?” sê Harry verontwaardig.

“Ja, jy word, en dis maar goed, nè, as die eerste ding wat jy op jou afnaweek doen, is om ’n onwettige verdedigingsgroep te stig.”

Maar hy klink nie kwaad of bekommerd nie. Inteendeel, hy kyk trots na Harry.

“Hoekom het Dung nie met ons gepraat nie?” sê Ron teleurgesteld. “Dit sou lekker gewees het om hom te sien.”

“Hy’s twintig jaar terug verbied om weer sy voete in Die Swynenes te sit, en daardie kroegman het ’n goeie geheue. Ons het Moodie se ekstra onsigbaarheidsmantel verloor toe Sturgis gearresteer is, dus trek Dung deesdae dikwels soos ’n heks aan. In elk geval... eerstens, Ron – ek het belowe om vir jou ’n boodskap van jou ma te gee.”

“Ja?” sê Ron aarselend.

“Sy sê jy mag onder geen omstandighede deelneem aan enige onwettige Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-groep nie. Sy sê jy sal vir seker geskors word en dit sal jou toekoms verwoes. Sy sê daar is hope tyd om later te leer hoe om jou te verdedig en jy’s te jonk om jou nou daaroor te bekommer. Sy sê ook” (Sirius kyk na die ander twee) “dat sy vir Harry en Hermien aanraai om nie met die groep voort te gaan nie, hoewel sy besef sy het geen gesag oor hulle nie. Maar sy smeeke hulle om te onthou dat sy net hul beste belange op die hart dra. Sy sou dit alles vir julle geskryf het, maar as die uil onderskep sou word, sou julle diep in die sop wees. En sy kan dit nie self vir julle kom sê nie, want sy is vanaand op diens.”

“Op diens vir wat?” sê Ron vinnig.

“Niks met jou uit te waai nie, dis vir die Orde. Dis aan my oorge-
laat om boodskapper te speel, en maak seker dat julle vir haar sê dat ek alles vir julle oorvertel het, want ek dink nie sy vertrou my nie.”

Dis weer stil. Kromskeen kap miaauend na Sirius se kop en Ron speel met ’n gat in die kaggelmat.

“Dan wil jy hê ek moet sê ek sal nie aan ’n Verdedigingsgroep behoort nie?” sê Ron.

"Ek? Beslis nie!" sê Sirius verbaas. "Ek dink dis 'n uitstekende idee!"

"Regtig?" sê Harry en sy hart voel sommer ligter.

"Natuurlik! Dink jy ek en jou pa sou gaan lê het en bevele vat van 'n ou heks soos Umbridge?"

"Maar verlede kwartaal het jy die hele tyd vir my gesê om versigtig te wees en nie kanse te waag –"

"Verlede jaar was daar iemand binne Hogwarts wat jou wou vermoor, Harry!" sê Sirius ongeduldig. "Vanjaar weet ons daar is iemand buite Hogwarts wat ons almal wil vermoor, dus dink ek dis 'n baie goeie idee om te leer hoe om jouself te verdedig."

"En as ons geskors word?" vra Hermien met 'n tergerige trek op haar gesig.

"Hermien, die hele ding was dan jou idee!" Harry staar geskok na haar.

"Ek weet dit was," sê sy en haal haar skouers op. "Ek wil net weet wat dink Sirius."

"Wel, eerder geskors en in staat om jouself te verdedig, as veilig in die skool maar heeltemal oningelig," sê Sirius.

"Hoor, hoor," sê Harry en Ron begeesterd.

"So," sê Sirius, "hoe organiseer julle hierdie groep? Waar kom julle bymekaar?"

"Dis nou 'n bietjie van 'n probleem," sê Harry. "Ons weet nie waar nie."

"Wat van die Kermende Krot?" stel Sirius voor.

"Hei, dis 'n idee," sê Ron opgewonde, maar Hermien maak 'n skeptiese geluid en hy en Harry kyk na haar, terwyl Sirius se kop in die vlamme ook na haar draai.

"Wel, daar was net vier van julle toe julle op skool was, Sirius," sê Hermien. "En julle kon almal na diere transformeer en julle kon seker ook al vier onder een onsigbaarheidsmantel wegkruip as julle moes. Maar ons is agt-en-twintig en sal iets soos 'n onsigbaarheid-sirkustent moet hê –"

"Goeie punt." Sirius lyk effens afgehaal. "Maar ek is seker julle sal aan iets kan dink. Daar was altyd 'n lekker groot geheime tunnel agter die spieël op die vierde vloer. Daar is dalk genoeg plek om vloeke te oefen."

Harry skud sy kop. "Fred en George sê dis toe. Dit het ingeval of iets."

"O..." Sirius frons. "Wel, ek sal daaroor dink en julle laat weet –"

Hy bly stil en sy gesig lyk skielik gespanne. Hy kyk rond. Dis of hy dwarsdeur die kaggel se soliede baksteenmuur kyk.

“Sirius?” sê Harry angstig.

Maar Sirius is weg. Harry staar nog ’n oomblik na die vlamme en kyk dan na Ron en Hermien. “Hoekom het hy –”

Hermien snak geskok na asem en spring orent. Sy beduie na die vuur.

Daar is ’n hand tussen die vlamme. Dit tas rond asof dit iets probeer vasgryp. Die hand het kort, stomp vingers vol lelike, outydse ringe.

Die driestuks laat spat. In die deur na die seuns se slaapsaal kyk Harry om. Umbridge se hand maak nog steeds grypbewegings in die vlamme asof sy presies weet waar Sirius se kop sekondes gelede was en vasberade is om dit beet te kry.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



DUMBLEDORE'S ARMY

Umbridge has been reading your mail, Harry. There's no other explanation."

"You think Umbridge attacked Hedwig?" he said, outraged.

"I'm almost certain of it," said Hermione grimly. "Watch your frog, it's escaping."

Harry pointed his wand at the bullfrog that had been hopping hopefully toward the other side of the table — "*Accio!*" — and it zoomed gloomily back into his hand.

Charms was always one of the best lessons in which to enjoy a private chat. There was generally so much movement and activity

that the danger of being overheard was very slight. Today, with the room full of croaking bullfrogs and cawing ravens, and with a heavy downpour of rain clattering and pounding against the classroom windows, Harry, Ron, and Hermione's whispered discussion about how Umbridge had nearly caught Sirius went quite unnoticed.

"I've been suspecting this ever since Filch accused you of ordering Dungbombs, because it seemed such a stupid lie," Hermione whispered. "I mean, once your letter had been read, it would have been quite clear you *weren't* ordering them, so you wouldn't have been in trouble at all — it's a bit of a feeble joke, isn't it? But then I thought, what if somebody just wanted an excuse to read your mail? Well then, it would be a perfect way for Umbridge to manage it — tip off Filch, let him do the dirty work and confiscate the letter, then either find a way of stealing it from him or else demand to see it — I don't think Filch would object, when's he ever stuck up for a student's rights? Harry, you're squashing your frog."

Harry looked down; he was indeed squeezing his bullfrog so tightly its eyes were popping; he replaced it hastily upon the desk.

"It was a very, very close call last night," said Hermione. "I just wonder if Umbridge knows how close it was. *Silencio!*"

The bullfrog on which she was practicing her Silencing Charm was struck dumb mid-croak and glared at her reproachfully.

"If she'd caught Snuffles . . ."

Harry finished the sentence for her.

"He'd probably be back in Azkaban this morning." He waved his wand without really concentrating; his bullfrog swelled like a green balloon and emitted a high-pitched whistle.

“*Silencio!*” said Hermione hastily, pointing her wand at Harry’s frog, which deflated silently before them. “Well, he mustn’t do it again, that’s all. I just don’t know how we’re going to let him know. We can’t send him an owl.”

“I don’t reckon he’ll risk it again,” said Ron. “He’s not stupid, he knows she nearly got him. *Silencio!*”

The large and ugly raven in front of him let out a derisive caw.

“*Silencio! SILENCIO!*”

The raven cawed more loudly.

“It’s the way you’re moving your wand,” said Hermione, watching Ron critically. “You don’t want to wave it, it’s more a sharp *jab*.”

“Ravens are harder than frogs,” said Ron testily.

“Fine, let’s swap,” said Hermione, seizing Ron’s raven and replacing it with her own fat bullfrog. “*Silencio!*” The raven continued to open and close its sharp beak, but no sound came out.

“Very good, Miss Granger!” said Professor Flitwick’s squeaky little voice and Harry, Ron, and Hermione all jumped. “Now, let me see you try, Mr. Weasley!”

“Wha — ? Oh — oh, right,” said Ron, very flustered. “Er — *Silencio!*”

He jabbed at the bullfrog so hard that he poked it in the eye; the frog gave a deafening croak and leapt off the desk.

It came as no surprise to any of them that Harry and Ron were given additional practice of the Silencing Charm for homework.

They were allowed to remain inside over break due to the downpour outside. They found seats in a noisy and overcrowded classroom on the first floor in which Peeves was floating dreamily

up near the chandelier, occasionally blowing an ink pellet at the top of somebody's head. They had barely sat down when Angelina came struggling toward them through the groups of gossiping students.

"I've got permission!" she said. "To re-form the Quidditch team!"

"*Excellent!*" said Ron and Harry together.

"Yeah," said Angelina, beaming. "I went to McGonagall and I *think* she might have appealed to Dumbledore — anyway, Umbridge had to give in. Ha! So I want you down at the pitch at seven o'clock tonight, all right, because we've got to make up time, you realize we're only three weeks away from our first match?"

She squeezed away from them, narrowly dodged an ink pellet from Peeves, which hit a nearby first year instead, and vanished from sight.

Ron's smile slipped slightly as he looked out of the window, which was now opaque with hammering rain.

"Hope this clears up . . . What's up with you, Hermione?"

She too was gazing at the window, but not as though she really saw it. Her eyes were unfocused and there was a frown on her face.

"Just thinking . . ." she said, still frowning at the rain-washed window.

"About Siri . . . Snuffles?" said Harry.

"No . . . not exactly . . ." said Hermione slowly. "More . . . wondering . . . I suppose we're doing the right thing . . . I think . . . aren't we?"

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

"Well, that clears that up," said Ron. "It would've been really annoying if you hadn't explained yourself properly."

Hermione looked at him as though she had only just realized he was there.

"I was just wondering," she said, her voice stronger now, "whether we're doing the right thing, starting this Defense Against the Dark Arts group."

"What!" said Harry and Ron together.

"Hermione, it was your idea in the first place!" said Ron indignantly.

"I know," said Hermione, twisting her fingers together. "But after talking to Snuffles . . ."

"But he's all for it!" said Harry.

"Yes," said Hermione, staring at the window again. "Yes, that's what made me think maybe it wasn't a good idea after all . . ."

Peeves floated over them on his stomach, peashooter at the ready; automatically all three of them lifted their bags to cover their heads until he had passed.

"Let's get this straight," said Harry angrily, as they put their bags back on the floor, "Sirius agrees with us, so you don't think we should do it anymore?"

Hermione looked tense and rather miserable. Now staring at her own hands she said, "Do you honestly trust his judgment?"

"Yes, I do!" said Harry at once. "He's always given us great advice!"

An ink pellet whizzed past them, striking Katie Bell squarely in the ear. Hermione watched Katie leap to her feet and start throwing things at Peeves; it was a few moments before Hermione spoke again and it sounded as though she was choosing her words very carefully.

“You don’t think he has become . . . sort of . . . reckless . . . since he’s been cooped up in Grimmauld Place? You don’t think he’s . . . kind of . . . living through us?”

“What d’you mean, ‘living through us’?” Harry retorted.

“I mean . . . well, I think he’d love to be forming secret defense societies right under the nose of someone from the Ministry. . . . I think he’s really frustrated at how little he can do where he is . . . so I think he’s keen to kind of . . . egg us on.”

Ron looked utterly perplexed.

“Sirius is right,” he said, “you *do* sound just like my mother.”

Hermione bit her lip and did not answer. The bell rang just as Peeves swooped down upon Katie and emptied an entire ink bottle over her head.

The weather did not improve as the day wore on, so that at seven o’clock that evening, when Harry and Ron went down to the Quidditch pitch for practice, they were soaked through within minutes, their feet slipping and sliding on the sodden grass. The sky was a deep, thundery gray and it was a relief to gain the warmth and light of the changing rooms, even if they knew the respite was only temporary. They found Fred and George debating whether to use one of their own Skiving Snackboxes to get out of flying.

“— but I bet she’d know what we’d done,” Fred said out of the corner of his mouth. “If only I hadn’t offered to sell her some Puking Pastilles yesterday —”

“We could try the Fever Fudge,” George muttered, “no one’s seen that yet —”

“Does it work?” inquired Ron hopefully, as the hammering of rain on the roof intensified and wind howled around the building.

“Well, yeah,” said Fred, “your temperature’ll go right up —”

“— but you get these massive pus-filled boils too,” said George, “and we haven’t worked out how to get rid of them yet.”

“I can’t see any boils,” said Ron, staring at the twins.

“No, well, you wouldn’t,” said Fred darkly, “they’re not in a place we generally display to the public —”

“— but they make sitting on a broom a right pain in the —”

“All right, everyone, listen up,” said Angelina loudly, emerging from the Captain’s office. “I know it’s not ideal weather, but there’s a good chance we’ll be playing Slytherin in conditions like this so it’s a good idea to work out how we’re going to cope with them. Harry, didn’t you do something to your glasses to stop the rain fogging them up when we played Hufflepuff in that storm?”

“Hermione did it,” said Harry. He pulled out his wand, tapped his glasses and said, “*Impervius!*”

“I think we all ought to try that,” said Angelina. “If we could just keep the rain off our faces it would really help visibility — all together, come on — *Impervius!* Okay, Let’s go.”

They all stowed their wands back in the inside pockets of their robes, shouldered their brooms, and followed Angelina out of the changing rooms.

They squelched through the deepening mud to the middle of the pitch; visibility was still very poor even with the Impervius Charm; light was fading fast and curtains of rain were sweeping the grounds.

“All right, on my whistle,” shouted Angelina.

Harry kicked off from the ground, spraying mud in all directions, and shot upward, the wind pulling him slightly off course. He had no idea how he was going to see the Snitch in this weather; he was having enough difficulty seeing the one Bludger with which they were practicing; a minute into the practice it almost unseated him and he had to use the Sloth Grip Roll to avoid it. Unfortunately Angelina did not see this; in fact, she did not appear to be able to see anything; none of them had a clue what the others were doing. The wind was picking up; even at a distance Harry could hear the swishing, pounding sounds of the rain pummeling the surface of the lake.

Angelina kept them at it for nearly an hour before conceding defeat. She led her sodden and disgruntled team back into the changing rooms, insisting that the practice had not been a waste of time, though without any real conviction in her voice. Fred and George were looking particularly annoyed; both were bandy-legged and winced with every movement. Harry could hear them complaining in low voices as he toweled his hair dry.

"I think a few of mine have ruptured," said Fred in a hollow voice.

"Mine haven't," said George, wincing. "They're throbbing like mad . . . feel bigger if anything . . ."

"OUCH!" said Harry.

He pressed the towel to his face, his eyes screwed tight with pain. The scar on his forehead had seared again, more painfully than in months.

"What's up?" said several voices.

Harry emerged from behind his towel; the changing room was blurred because he was not wearing his glasses; but he could still tell

that everyone's face was turned toward him.

"Nothing," he muttered, "I — poked myself in the eye, that's all . . ."

But he gave Ron a significant look and the two of them hung back as the rest of the team filed back outside, muffled in their cloaks, their hats pulled low over their ears.

"What happened?" said Ron, the moment that Alicia had disappeared through the door. "Was it your scar?"

Harry nodded.

"But . . ." Looking scared, Ron strode across to the window and stared out into the rain. "He — he can't be near us now, can he?"

"No," Harry muttered, sinking onto a bench and rubbing his forehead. "He's probably miles away. It hurt because . . . he's angry."

Harry had not meant to say that at all, and heard the words as though a stranger had spoken them — yet he knew at once that they were true. He did not know how he knew it, but he did; Voldemort, wherever he was, whatever he was doing, was in a towering temper.

"Did you see him?" said Ron, looking horrified. "Did you . . . get a vision, or something?"

Harry sat quite still, staring at his feet, allowing his mind and his memory to relax in the aftermath of the pain . . .

A confused tangle of shapes, a howling rush of voices . . .

"He wants something done, and it's not happening fast enough," he said.

Again, he felt surprised to hear the words coming out of his mouth, and yet quite certain that they were true.

"But . . . how do you know?" said Ron.

Harry shook his head and covered his eyes with his hands, pressing down upon them with his palms. Little stars erupted in them. He felt Ron sit down on the bench beside him and knew Ron was staring at him.

"Is this what it was about last time?" said Ron in a hushed voice. "When your scar hurt in Umbridge's office? You-Know-Who was angry?"

Harry shook his head.

"What is it, then?"

Harry was thinking himself back. He had been looking into Umbridge's face . . . His scar had hurt . . . and he had had that odd feeling in his stomach . . . a strange, leaping feeling . . . a *happy* feeling. . . . But, of course, he had not recognized it for what it was, as he had been feeling so miserable himself. . . .

"Last time, it was because he was pleased," he said. "Really pleased. He thought . . . something good was going to happen. And the night before we came back to Hogwarts . . ." He thought back to the moment when his scar had hurt so badly in his and Ron's bedroom in Grimmauld Place. "He was furious . . ."

He looked around at Ron, who was gaping at him.

"You could take over from Trelawney, mate," he said in an awed voice.

"I'm not making prophecies," said Harry.

"No, you know what you're doing?" Ron said, sounding both scared and impressed. "Harry, *you're reading You-Know-Who's mind*. . . ."

"No," said Harry, shaking his head. "It's more like . . . his mood, I suppose. I'm just getting flashes of what mood he's in. . . . Dumbledore said something like this was happening last year. . . . He said that when Voldemort was near me, or when he was feeling hatred, I could tell. Well, now I'm feeling it when he's pleased too. . . ."

There was a pause. The wind and rain lashed at the building.

"You've got to tell someone," said Ron.

"I told Sirius last time."

"Well, tell him about this time!"

"Can't, can I?" said Harry grimly. "Umbridge is watching the owls and the fires, remember?"

"Well then, Dumbledore —"

"I've just told you, he already knows," said Harry shortly, getting to his feet, taking his cloak off his peg, and swinging it around himself. "There's no point telling him again."

Ron did up the fastening of his own cloak, watching Harry thoughtfully.

"Dumbledore'd want to know," he said.

Harry shrugged.

"C'mon. . . we've still got Silencing Charms to practice. . . ."

They hurried back through the dark grounds, sliding and stumbling up the muddy lawns, not talking. Harry was thinking hard. What was it that Voldemort wanted done that was not happening quickly enough?

"He's got other plans . . . plans he can put into operation very quietly indeed . . . stuff he can only get by stealth . . . like a

weapon. Something he didn't have last time."

He had not thought about those words in weeks; he had been too absorbed in what was going on at Hogwarts, too busy dwelling on the ongoing battles with Umbridge, the injustice of all the Ministry interference. . . . But now they came back to him and made him wonder. . . . Voldemort's anger would make sense if he was no nearer laying hands on the weapon, whatever it was. . . . Had the Order thwarted him, stopped him from seizing it? Where was it kept? Who had it now?

"*Mimulus mibletonia*," said Ron's voice and Harry came back to his senses just in time to clamber through the portrait hole into the common room.

It appeared that Hermione had gone to bed early, leaving Crookshanks curled in a nearby chair and an assortment of knobbly, knitted elf hats lying on a table by the fire. Harry was rather grateful that she was not around because he did not much want to discuss his scar hurting and have her urge him to go to Dumbledore too. Ron kept throwing him anxious glances, but Harry pulled out his Potions book and set to work to finish his essay, though he was only pretending to concentrate and, by the time that Ron said he was going to bed too, had written hardly anything.

Midnight came and went while Harry was reading and rereading a passage about the uses of scurvy-grass, lovage, and sneezewort and not taking in a word of it. . . .

These plantes are moste efficacious in the inflaming of the braine, and are therefore much used in Confusing and Befuddlement Draughts, where the wizard is desirous of producing

hot-headedness and recklessness. . . .

. . . Hermione said Sirius was becoming reckless cooped up in Grimmauld Place. . . .

. . . moste efficacious in the inflaming of the braine, and are therefore much used. . . .

. . . the *Daily Prophet* would think his brain was inflamed if they found out that he knew what Voldemort was feeling. . . .

therefore much used in Confusing and Befuddlement Draughts . . .

. . . confusing was the word, all right; *why* did he know what Voldemort was feeling? What was this weird connection between them, which Dumbledore had never been able to explain satisfactorily?

. . . where the wizard is desirous . . .

. . . how he would like to sleep . . .

. . . of producing hot-headedness . . .

. . . It was warm and comfortable in his armchair before the fire, with the rain still beating heavily on the windowpanes and Crookshanks purring and the crackling of the flames. . . .

The book slipped from Harry's slack grip and landed with a dull thud on the hearthrug. His head fell sideways. . . .

He was walking once more along a windowless corridor, his footsteps echoing in the silence. As the door at the end of the passage loomed larger his heart beat fast with excitement. . . . If he could only open it . . . enter beyond . . .

He stretched out his hand. . . . His fingertips were inches from it. . . .

“Harry Potter, sir!”

He awoke with a start. The candles had all been extinguished in the common room, but there was something moving close by.

“Whozair?” said Harry, sitting upright in his chair. The fire was almost extinguished, the room very dark.

“Dobby has your owl, sir!” said a squeaky voice.

“Dobby?” said Harry thickly, peering through the gloom toward the source of the voice.

Dobby the house-elf was standing beside the table on which Hermione had left her half a dozen knitted hats. His large, pointed ears were now sticking out from beneath what looked like all the hats that Hermione had ever knitted; he was wearing one on top of the other, so that his head seemed elongated by two or three feet, and on the very topmost bobble sat Hedwig, hooting serenely and obviously cured.

“Dobby volunteered to return Harry Potter’s owl!” said the elf squeakily, with a look of positive adoration on his face. “Professor Grubbly-Plank says she is all well now, sir!”

He sank into a deep bow so that his pencil-like nose brushed the threadbare surface of the hearthrug and Hedwig gave an indignant hoot and fluttered onto the arm of Harry’s chair.

“Thanks, Dobby!” said Harry, stroking Hedwig’s head and blinking hard, trying to rid himself of the image of the door in his dream. . . . It had been very vivid. . . . Looking back at Dobby, he noticed that the elf was also wearing several scarves and innumerable socks, so that his feet looked far too big for his body.

“Er . . . have you been taking *all* the clothes Hermione’s been

leaving out?"

"Oh no, sir," said Dobby happily, "Dobby has been taking some for Winky too, sir."

"Yeah, how is Winky?" asked Harry.

Dobby's ears drooped slightly.

"Winky is still drinking lots, sir," he said sadly, his enormous round green eyes, large as tennis balls, downcast. "She still does not care for clothes, Harry Potter. Nor do the other house-elves. None of them will clean Gryffindor Tower anymore, not with the hats and socks hidden everywhere, they finds them insulting, sir. Dobby does it all himself, sir, but Dobby does not mind, sir, for he always hopes to meet Harry Potter and tonight, sir, he has got his wish!" Dobby sank into a deep bow again. "But Harry Potter does not seem happy," Dobby went on, straightening up again and looking timidly at Harry. "Dobby heard him muttering in his sleep. Was Harry Potter having bad dreams?"

"Not really bad," said Harry, yawning and rubbing his eyes. "I've had worse."

The elf surveyed Harry out of his vast, orblike eyes. Then he said very seriously, his ears drooping, "Dobby wishes he could help Harry Potter, for Harry Potter set Dobby free and Dobby is much, much happier now . . ."

Harry smiled.

"You can't help me, Dobby, but thanks for the offer . . ."

He bent and picked up his Potions book. He'd have to try and finish the essay tomorrow. He closed the book and as he did so the firelight illuminated the thin white scars on the back of his hand —

the result of his detention with Umbridge.

“Wait a moment — there *is* something you can do for me, Dobby,” said Harry slowly.

The elf looked around, beaming.

“Name it, Harry Potter, sir!”

“I need to find a place where twenty-eight people can practice Defense Against the Dark Arts without being discovered by any of the teachers. Especially,” Harry clenched his hand on the book, so that the scars shone pearly white, “Professor Umbridge.”

He expected the elf’s smile to vanish, his ears to droop; he expected him to say that this was impossible, or else that he would try, but his hopes were not high. What he had not expected was for Dobby to give a little skip, his ears wagging happily, and clap his hands together.

“Dobby knows the perfect place, sir!” he said happily. “Dobby heard tell of it from the other house-elves when he came to Hogwarts, sir. It is known by us as the Come and Go Room, sir, or else as the Room of Requirement!”

“Why?” said Harry curiously.

“Because it is a room that a person can only enter,” said Dobby seriously, “when they have real need of it. Sometimes it is there, and sometimes it is not, but when it appears, it is always equipped for the seeker’s needs. Dobby has used it, sir,” said the elf, dropping his voice and looking guilty, “when Winky has been very drunk. He has hidden her in the Room of Requirement and he has found antidotes to butterbeer there, and a nice elf-sized bed to settle her on while she sleeps it off, sir. . . . And Dobby knows Mr. Filch has found extra

cleaning materials there when he has run short, sir, and —”

“— and if you really needed a bathroom,” said Harry, suddenly remembering something Dumbledore had said at the Yule Ball the previous Christmas, “would it fill itself with chamber pots?”

“Dobby expects so, sir,” said Dobby, nodding earnestly. “It is a most amazing room, sir.”

“How many people know about it?” said Harry, sitting up straighter in his chair.

“Very few, sir. Mostly people stumbles across it when they needs it, sir, but often they never finds it again, for they do not know that it is always there waiting to be called into service, sir.”

“It sounds brilliant,” said Harry, his heart racing. “It sounds perfect, Dobby. When can you show me where it is?”

“Anytime, Harry Potter, sir,” said Dobby, looking delighted at Harry’s enthusiasm. “We could go now, if you like!”

For a moment Harry was tempted to go now; he was halfway out of his seat, intending to hurry upstairs for his Invisibility Cloak when, not for the first time, a voice very much like Hermione’s whispered in his ear: *reckless*. It was, after all, very late, and he was exhausted.

“Not tonight, Dobby,” said Harry reluctantly, sinking back into his chair. “This is really important. . . . I don’t want to blow it, it’ll need proper planning. . . . Listen, can you just tell me exactly where this Room of Requirement is and how to get in there?”

Their robes billowed and swirled around them as they splashed across the flooded vegetable patch to double Herbology, where they

could hardly hear what Professor Sprout was saying over the hammering of raindrops hard as hailstones on the greenhouse roof. The afternoon's Care of Magical Creatures lesson was to be relocated from the storm-swept grounds to a free classroom on the ground floor and, to their intense relief, Angelina sought out her team at lunch to tell them that Quidditch practice was canceled.

"Good," said Harry quietly, when she told him, "because we've found somewhere to have our first Defense meeting. Tonight, eight o'clock, seventh floor opposite that tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy being clubbed by those trolls. Can you tell Katie and Alicia?"

She looked slightly taken aback but promised to tell the others; Harry returned hungrily to his sausages and mash. When he looked up to take a drink of pumpkin juice, he found Hermione watching him.

"What?" he said thickly.

"Well . . . it's just that Dobby's plans aren't always that safe. Don't you remember when he lost you all the bones in your arm?"

"This room isn't just some mad idea of Dobby's; Dumbledore knows about it too, he mentioned it to me at the Yule Ball."

Hermione's expression cleared.

"Dumbledore told you about it?"

"Just in passing," said Harry, shrugging.

"Oh well, that's all right then," said Hermione briskly and she raised no more objections.

Together with Ron they had spent most of the day seeking out those people who had signed their names to the list in the Hog's Head and telling them where to meet that evening. Somewhat to Harry's disappointment, it was Ginny who managed to find Cho Chang and

her friend first; however, by the end of dinner he was confident that the news had been passed to every one of the twenty-five people who had turned up in the Hog's Head.

At half-past seven Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the Gryffindor common room, Harry clutching a certain piece of aged parchment in his hand. Fifth years were allowed to be out in the corridors until nine o'clock, but all three of them kept looking around nervously as they made their way up to the seventh floor.

"Hold it," said Harry warningly, unfolding the piece of parchment at the top of the last staircase, tapping it with his wand, and muttering, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

A map of Hogwarts appeared upon the blank surface of the parchment. Tiny black moving dots, labeled with names, showed where various people were.

"Filch is on the second floor," said Harry, holding the map close to his eyes and scanning it closely, "and Mrs. Norris is on the fourth."

"And Umbridge?" said Hermione anxiously.

"In her office," said Harry, pointing. "Okay, let's go."

They hurried along the corridor to the place Dobby had described to Harry, a stretch of blank wall opposite an enormous tapestry depicting Barnabas the Barmy's foolish attempt to train trolls for the ballet.

"Okay," said Harry quietly, while a moth-eaten troll paused in his relentless clubbing of the would-be ballet teacher to watch. "Dobby said to walk past this bit of wall three times, concentrating hard on what we need."

They did so, turning sharply at the window just beyond the blank

stretch of wall, then at the man-size vase on its other side. Ron had screwed up his eyes in concentration; Hermione was whispering something under her breath; Harry's fists were clenched as he stared ahead of him.

We need somewhere to learn to fight. . . . he thought. Just give us a place to practice . . . somewhere they can't find us . . .

"Harry," said Hermione sharply, as they wheeled around after their third walk past.

A highly polished door had appeared in the wall. Ron was staring at it, looking slightly wary. Harry reached out, seized the brass handle, pulled open the door, and led the way into a spacious room lit with flickering torches like those that illuminated the dungeons eight floors below.

The walls were lined with wooden bookcases, and instead of chairs there were large silk cushions on the floor. A set of shelves at the far end of the room carried a range of instruments such as Sneakoscopes, Secrecy Sensors, and a large, cracked Foe-Glass that Harry was sure had hung, the previous year, in the fake Moody's office.

"These will be good when we're practicing Stunning," said Ron enthusiastically, prodding one of the cushions with his foot.

"And just look at these books!" said Hermione excitedly, running a finger along the spines of the large leather-bound tomes. "*A Compendium of Common Curses and Their Counter-Actions . . . The Dark Arts Outsmarted . . . Self-Defensive Spellwork . . .* wow . . ." She looked around at Harry, her face glowing, and he saw that the presence of hundreds of books had finally convinced

Hermione that what they were doing was right. "Harry, this is wonderful, there's everything we need here!"

And without further ado she slid *Jinxes for the Jinxed* from its shelf, sank onto the nearest cushion, and began to read.

There was a gentle knock on the door. Harry looked around; Ginny, Neville, Lavender, Parvati, and Dean had arrived.

"Whoa," said Dean, staring around, impressed. "What is this place?"

Harry began to explain, but before he had finished more people had arrived, and he had to start all over again. By the time eight o'clock arrived, every cushion was occupied. Harry moved across to the door and turned the key protruding from the lock; it clicked in a satisfyingly loud way and everybody fell silent, looking at him. Hermione carefully marked her page of *Jinxes for the Jinxed* and set the book aside.

"Well," said Harry, slightly nervously. "This is the place we've found for practices, and you've — er — obviously found it okay —"

"It's fantastic!" said Cho, and several people murmured their agreement.

"It's bizarre," said Fred, frowning around at it. "We once hid from Filch in here, remember, George? But it was just a broom cupboard then . . ."

"Hey, Harry, what's this stuff?" asked Dean from the rear of the room, indicating the Sneakoscopes and the Foe-Glass.

"Dark Detectors," said Harry, stepping between the cushions to reach them. "Basically they all show when Dark wizards or enemies are around, but you don't want to rely on them too much, they can be

fooled . . .”

He gazed for a moment into the cracked Foe-Glass; shadowy figures were moving around inside it, though none was recognizable. He turned his back on it.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about the sort of stuff we ought to do first and — er —” He noticed a raised hand. “What, Hermione?”

“I think we ought to elect a leader,” said Hermione.

“Harry’s leader,” said Cho at once, looking at Hermione as though she were mad, and Harry’s stomach did yet another back flip.

“Yes, but I think we ought to vote on it properly,” said Hermione, unperturbed. “It makes it formal and it gives him authority. So — everyone who thinks Harry ought to be our leader?”

Everybody put up their hands, even Zacharias Smith, though he did it very halfheartedly.

“Er — right, thanks,” said Harry, who could feel his face burning. “And — *what*, Hermione?”

“I also think we ought to have a name,” she said brightly, her hand still in the air. “It would promote a feeling of team spirit and unity, don’t you think?”

“Can we be the Anti-Umbridge League?” said Angelina hopefully.

“Or the Ministry of Magic Are Morons Group?” suggested Fred.

“I was thinking,” said Hermione, frowning at Fred, “more of a name that didn’t tell everyone what we were up to, so we can refer to it safely outside meetings.”

“The Defense Association?” said Cho. “The D.A. for short, so nobody knows what we’re talking about?”

“Yeah, the D.A.’s good,” said Ginny. “Only let’s make it stand for

Dumbledore's Army because that's the Ministry's worst fear, isn't it?"

There was a good deal of appreciative murmuring and laughter at this.

"All in favor of the D.A.?" said Hermione bossily, kneeling up on her cushion to count. "That's a majority — motion passed!"

She pinned the piece of paper with all of their names on it on the wall and wrote DUMBLEDORE'S ARMY across the top in large letters.

"Right," said Harry, when she had sat down again, "shall we get practicing then? I was thinking, the first thing we should do is *Expelliarmus*, you know, the Disarming Charm. I know it's pretty basic but I've found it really useful —"

"Oh *please*," said Zacharias Smith, rolling his eyes and folding his arms. "I don't think *Expelliarmus* is exactly going to help us against You-Know-Who, do you?"

"I've used it against him," said Harry quietly. "It saved my life last June."

Smith opened his mouth stupidly. The rest of the room was very quiet.

"But if you think it's beneath you, you can leave," Harry said.

Smith did not move. Nor did anybody else.

"Okay," said Harry, his mouth slightly drier than usual with all those eyes upon him, "I reckon we should all divide into pairs and practice."

It felt very odd to be issuing instructions, but not nearly as odd as seeing them followed. Everybody got to their feet at once and

divided up. Predictably, Neville was left partnerless.

“You can practice with me,” Harry told him. “Right — on the count of three, then — one, two, three —”

The room was suddenly full of shouts of “*Expelliarmus!*”. Wands flew in all directions, missed spells hit books on shelves and sent them flying into the air. Harry was too quick for Neville, whose wand went spinning out of his hand, hit the ceiling in a shower of sparks, and landed with a clatter on top of a bookshelf, from which Harry retrieved it with a Summoning Charm. Glancing around he thought he had been right to suggest that they practice the basics first; there was a lot of shoddy spellwork going on; many people were not succeeding in disarming their opponents at all, but merely causing them to jump backward a few paces or wince as the feeble spell whooshed over them.

“*Expelliarmus!*” said Neville, and Harry, caught unawares, felt his wand fly out of his hand.

“I DID IT!” said Neville gleefully. “I’ve never done it before — I DID IT!”

“Good one!” said Harry encouragingly, deciding not to point out that in a real duel situation Neville’s opponent was unlikely to be staring in the opposite direction with his wand held loosely at his side. “Listen, Neville, can you take it in turns to practice with Ron and Hermione for a couple of minutes so I can walk around and see how the rest are doing?”

Harry moved off into the middle of the room. Something very odd was happening to Zacharias Smith; every time he opened his mouth to disarm Anthony Goldstein, his own wand would fly out of his hand,

yet Anthony did not seem to be making a sound. Harry did not have to look far for the solution of the mystery, however; Fred and George were several feet from Smith and taking it in turns to point their wands at his back.

“Sorry, Harry,” said George hastily, when Harry caught his eye. “Couldn’t resist . . .”

Harry walked around the other pairs, trying to correct those who were doing the spell wrong. Ginny was teamed with Michael Corner; she was doing very well, whereas Michael was either very bad or unwilling to jinx her. Ernie Macmillan was flourishing his wand unnecessarily, giving his partner time to get in under his guard; the Creevey brothers were enthusiastic but erratic and mainly responsible for all the books leaping off the shelves around them. Luna Lovegood was similarly patchy, occasionally sending Justin Finch-Fletchley’s wand spinning out of his hand, at other times merely causing his hair to stand on end.

“Okay, stop!” Harry shouted. “*Stop! STOP!*”

I need a whistle, he thought, and immediately spotted one lying on top of the nearest row of books. He caught it up and blew hard. Everyone lowered their wands.

“That wasn’t bad,” said Harry, “but there’s definite room for improvement.” Zacharias Smith glared at him. “Let’s try again . . .”

He moved off around the room again, stopping here and there to make suggestions. Slowly the general performance improved. He avoided going near Cho and her friend for a while, but after walking twice around every other pair in the room felt he could not ignore them any longer.

"Oh no," said Cho rather wildly as he approached. "*Expelliarmious!* I mean, *Expellimellius!* I — oh, sorry, Marietta!"

Her curly-haired friend's sleeve had caught fire; Marietta extinguished it with her own wand and glared at Harry as though it was his fault.

"You made me nervous, I was doing all right before then!" Cho told Harry ruefully.

"That was quite good," Harry lied, but when she raised her eyebrows he said, "Well, no, it was lousy, but I know you can do it properly, I was watching from over there . . ."

She laughed. Her friend Marietta looked at them rather sourly and turned away.

"Don't mind her," Cho muttered. "She doesn't really want to be here but I made her come with me. Her parents have forbidden her to do anything that might upset Umbridge, you see — her mum works for the Ministry."

"What about your parents?" asked Harry.

"Well, they've forbidden me to get on the wrong side of Umbridge too," said Cho, drawing herself up proudly. "But if they think I'm not going to fight You-Know-Who after what happened to Cedric —"

She broke off, looking rather confused, and an awkward silence fell between them; Terry Boot's wand went whizzing past Harry's ear and hit Alicia Spinnet hard on the nose.

"Well, my father is *very* supportive of any anti-Ministry action!" said Luna Lovegood proudly from just behind Harry; evidently she had been eavesdropping on his conversation while Justin Finch-Fletchley attempted to disentangle himself from the robes that had

flown up over his head. "He's always saying he'd believe anything of Fudge, I mean, the number of goblins Fudge has had assassinated! And of course he uses the Department of Mysteries to develop terrible poisons, which he feeds secretly to anybody who disagrees with him. And then there's his Umgubular Slashkilter —"

"Don't ask," Harry muttered to Cho as she opened her mouth, looking puzzled. She giggled.

"Hey, Harry," Hermione called from the other end of the room, "have you checked the time?"

He looked down at his watch and received a shock — it was already ten past nine, which meant they needed to get back to their common rooms immediately or risk being caught and punished by Filch for being out-of-bounds. He blew his whistle; everybody stopped shouting, "*Expelliarmus!*" and the last couple of wands clattered to the floor.

"Well, that was pretty good," said Harry, "but we've overrun, we'd better leave it here. Same time, same place next week?"

"Sooner!" said Dean Thomas eagerly and many people nodded in agreement.

Angelina, however, said quickly, "The Quidditch season's about to start, we need team practices too!"

"Let's say next Wednesday night, then," said Harry, "and we can decide on additional meetings then. . . . Come on, we'd better get going. . . ."

He pulled out the Marauder's Map again and checked it carefully for signs of teachers on the seventh floor. He let them all leave in threes and fours, watching their tiny dots anxiously to see that they

returned safely to their dormitories: the Hufflepuffs to the basement corridor that also led to the kitchens, the Ravenclaws to a tower on the west side of the castle, and the Gryffindors along the corridor to the seventh floor and the Fat Lady's portrait.

"That was really, really good, Harry," said Hermione, when finally it was just her, Harry, and Ron left.

"Yeah, it was!" said Ron enthusiastically, as they slipped out of the door and watched it melt back into stone behind them. "Did you see me disarm Hermione, Harry?"

"Only once," said Hermione, stung. "I got you loads more than you got me —"

"I did not only get you once, I got you at least three times —"

"Well, if you're counting the one where you tripped over your own feet and knocked the wand out of my hand —"

They argued all the way back to the common room, but Harry was not listening to them. He had one eye on the Marauder's Map, but he was also thinking of how Cho had said he made her nervous.

Dompeldorius se Soldate

“Umbridge het jou pos ge lees, Harry. Daar’s geen ander verklaring nie,” sê Hermien.

“Dink jy Umbridge het vir Hedwig aangeval?” sê Harry kwaad.

“Ek is feitlik seker daarvan. Oppas, jou padda gaan wegkom.”

Harry rig sy towerstaf op die brulpadda wat hoopvol na die oorkant van die tafel hop – “*Accio!*” – en dis terug in sy hand.

Towerspreuke is een van die beste klasse as jy iets stilletjies wil bespreek. Daar gebeur gewoonlik soveel dinge dat die kans dat jy afgeluister kan word, skraal is. Vandag is die klaskamer vol kwakende brulpaddas en krassende rawe, en die reën kletter teen die ruite. Niemand kan Harry, Ron en Hermien se gefluisterde gesprek oor hoe amper Umbridge vir Sirius gevang het, hoor nie.

“Ek vermoed dit al van die keer dat Fillis jou beskuldig het dat jy Misbomme bestel het,” fluister Hermien. “Ek bedoel, as hy jou brief ge lees het, sou hy mos kon sien dat jy *nie* Misbomme bestel het nie en niks sou met jou gebeur het nie – dit sou net ’n simpel grap gewees het. Maar toe dink ek: wat as iemand net ’n verskoning gesoek het om jou brief te onderskep? Dit sou Umbridge uitstekend gepas het – gee vir Fillis ’n wenk, laat hom die vuilwerk doen en steel dan die brief by hom of vat dit af. Ek dink nie Fillis sou daaroor geworrie het nie – wanneer het hy al ooit vir studente se regte opgekom? Harry, jy druk jou arme padda te styf!”

Harry kyk af. Hy druk sy brulpadda so styf vas dat sy oë uitpeul. Hy sit dit vinnig op die tafel neer.

“Dit was gisteraand baie amper, hoor,” sê Hermien. “Ek wonder of Umbridge weet hoe amper. *Silencio.*”

Die brulpadda waarop sy haar Stille-towerspreuk oefen, hou in die middel van ’n kwaak op en staar verontwaardig na haar.

“As sy vir Snuffels gevang het –”

Harry maak die sin namens haar klaar.

“– was hy vandag terug in Azkaban.” Hy swaai sy towerstaf son-

der om regtig te konsentreer en sy brulpadda swel op soos 'n groen ballon en fluit skril.

"*Silencio!*" sê Hermien vinnig en rig haar towerstaf op Harry se padda, wat saggies afblaas. "Wel, hy moet dit nie weer doen nie, dis al. As ons net kon weet hoe om hom te waarsku! Ons kan nie 'n uil stuur nie –"

"Ek glo nie hy sal dit weer waag nie," sê Ron. "Hy's nie dom nie, hy weet hoe amper sy hom gehad het. *Silencio!*"

Die groot swart raaf voor hom kryns minagtend.

"*Silencio, SILENCIO!*"

Die raaf kryns nog harder.

"Dis die manier wat jy jou towerstaf beweeg," sê Hermien, terwyl sy Ron krities dophou. "Jy moet dit nie waai nie, dis eerder 'n skerp steek."

"Rawe is moeiliker as paddas," sê Ron deur geklemde tande.

"Goed, kom ons ruil." Hermien gryp Ron se raaf en gee haar vet brulpadda vir hom. "*Silencio!*" Die raaf se snawel gaan nog steeds oop en toe, maar dit maak nie 'n geluid nie.

"Baie mooi, juffrou La Grange," sê professor Flickerpitt in sy skril piepstemmetjie sodat Harry, Ron en Hermien wip. "Probeer jy nou, meneer Weasley."

"Wa-? O – oukei," sê Ron baie verstrooid. "Hm – *silencio!*"

Hy steek so hard na die padda dat hy dit in die oog tref. Die padda kwaak oorverdowend en spring van die tafel af. Niemand is verbaas toe Harry en Ron ekstra oefeninge vir die Stilte-towerspreuk kry nie.

Dit reën so hard dat hulle pouse binne mag bly. Hulle kry plek in 'n raserige, stampvol klaskamer op die eerste verdieping waar Nurks droomverlore in die lug naby die kandelaar sweef en elke nou en dan 'n inkbom na iemand se kop blaas. Hulle het skaars gaan sit toe Angelina 'n pad deur die geselsende mense na hulle toe oopdruk.

"Ek het toestemming!" sê sy. "Vir die Kwiddiekspan!"

"*Fantasties!*" sê Ron en Harry gelyk.

"Ja!" Angelina straal. "Ek het na McGonagall gegaan en ek dink sy't met Dompeldorius gaan praat. Wat ook al, Umbridge moes ingee. Ha! Julle moet almal om sewe-uur by die Kwiddiekveld wees, ons moet verlore tyd inhaal. Besef julle ons speel ons eerste wedstryd oor drie weke?"

Sy druk weer vir haar 'n pad oop na haar plek en moet vinnig vir een van Nurks se inkbomme koes, wat 'n eerstejaar tref.

Ron se glimlag raak effens flouër toe hy deur die venster kyk, wat nou vaal is van die reën.

"Ek hoop dit klaar op. Wat gaan met jou aan, Hermien?"

Sy kyk ook deur die venster, maar dis asof sy dit nie regtig sien nie. Haar oë fokus nie en daar is 'n frons op haar gesig.

"Ek het net gedink . . ." Sy kyk nog steeds fronsend na die natgemende venster.

"Aan Siri – Snuffels?" vra Harry.

"Nee . . . nie eintlik nie . . ." sê Hermien stadig. "Meer gewonder ons doen seker die regte ding . . . of hoe?"

Harry en Ron kyk na mekaar.

"Wel, nou weet ons presies wat aangaan," sê Ron. "Dit sou regtig lastig gewees het as jy dit nie so duidelik gestel het nie."

Hermien kyk na hom asof sy hom vir die eerste keer raak sien.

"Ek het net gewonder," sê sy en hierdie keer is haar stem sterker, "of ons die regte ding doen met hierdie Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-groep."

"Wat?" sê Harry en Ron gelyk.

"Hermien, dit was jou idee in die eerste plek!" sê Ron verontwaardig.

"Ek weet," sê Hermien en vleg haar vingers in mekaar. "Maar nadat ons met Snuffels gepraat het . . ."

"Maar hy's *daarvoor*," sê Harry.

"Ja," sê Hermien en staar weer deur die venster. "Ja, dis wat my laat dink dis dalk nie 'n goeie idee nie . . ."

Nurks sweef oor hulle, sy blaaspyp teen sy mond. Al drie hou hul sakke dadelik oor hul koppe tot hy weg is.

"Kan ons hieroor praat?" sê Harry ergerlik toe hulle hul sakke weer neergesit het. "Omdat Sirius met ons saamstem, dink jy ons moet dit nie meer doen nie?"

Hermien lyk gespanne en effens miserabel. Sy kyk af na haar hande. "Vertrou julle regtig sy oordeel?"

"Natuurlik!" sê Harry dadelik. "Hy't nog altyd vir ons wonderlike raad gegee!"

'n Inkbom seil oor hulle en tref Katie Bell teen die oor. Hermien kyk hoe Katie omspring en Nurks met goed bestook. Dit duur 'n rukkie voor Hermien weer praat en dit klink of sy haar woorde baie versigtig kies.

"Dink julle nie hy het 'n bietjie . . . roekeloos . . . geword vandat hy in Grimmauldplein vasgekeer is nie? Dink julle nie hy probeer soort van . . . deur ons lewe nie?"

"Wat bedoel jy met 'deur ons lewe'?" kap Harry terug.

"Ek bedoel . . . Wel, ek dink hy sal baie graag 'n geheime Verdedigingsgroep onder iemand van die Ministerie se neus wil vorm . . . Ek dink hy's baie gefrustreerd omdat hy so min kan doen

daar waar hy nou is. Ek dink dus hy por ons soort van gretig aan."

Ron lyk heeltemal verward.

"Sirius is reg," sê hy, "jy klink nes my ma."

Hermien byt op haar lip en antwoord nie. Die klok lui net toe Nurks na Katie swiep en 'n hele inkbottel oor haar kop omkeer.

Die weer raak nie beter soos die dag vorder nie en toe Harry en Ron om sewe-uur na die Kwiddiekveld stap, glip en gly hulle oor die nat gras en is binne minute sopnat gereën. Die lug is 'n diep, onheilspellende grys en dis 'n verligting om in die warm, verligte kleedkamer te kom, hoewel hulle weet dis net vir 'n rukkie. Fred en George is reeds daar. Hulle stry of hulle 'n Stokkiesdraaisnoepie gaan gebruik om die oefening vry te spring.

"... maar ek wed sy sal weet waarmee ons besig is," sê Fred uit die hoek van sy mond. "As ek net nie gister 'n paar Braakbomme aan haar probeer verkoop het nie."

"Wat van die Koorsknoeiërs," mompel George, "niemand het dit nog gesien nie –"

"Werk dit?" vra Ron hoopvol toe die reën nog harder op die dak dreun en die wind om die gebou huil.

"Wel, ja," sê Fred, "jou temperatuur skiet die hoogte in."

"Maar jy kry ook sulke hengse swere vol etter," sê George. "En ons weet nog nie hoe om daarvan ontslae te raak nie."

"Ek sien geen swere nie," sê Ron en staar na die tweeling.

"Nee, wel, jy sal nie," sê Fred nors, "hulle is op 'n plek wat jy nie gewoonlik sal uitstal nie."

"Maar dis aaklig om op 'n besem te sit," vul George aan.

"Goed, julle almal, luister hier," sê Angelina hard toe sy uit die kaptein se kantoor kom. "Ek weet die weer speel nie saam nie, maar daar's 'n goeie kans dat ons in sulke omstandighede teen Slibberin sal speel, dus is dit 'n goeie idee om te sien hoe ons dit hanteer. Harry, het jy nie laas toe ons in 'n storm teen Hoesenproes gespeel het iets aan jou bril gedoen dat dit nie toewasem nie?"

"Hermien het," sê Harry. Hy haal sy towerstaf uit, tik teen sy bril en sê: "*Impervius!*"

"Ek dink ons almal moet dit probeer," sê Angelina. "As ons die reën uit ons gesigte kan hou, sal ons baie beter sien – almal saam, komaan – *Impervius!* Oukei, kom ons gaan."

Hulle steek hul towerstawwe in hul binnesakke, swaai die besems oor hul skouers en volg Angelina uit die kleedkamer.

Hulle plas deur modder na die middel van die veld. Selfs met die

Impervius-towerspreuk sien hulle nog steeds baie sleg. Dit word vinnig donker en vlae reën swiep oor die skoolterrein.

"Goed, wag vir die fluitjie!" skree Angelina.

Harry skop weg dat die modder na alle kante spat. Hy skiet op en die wind ruk hom effens van koers. Hy weet nie hoe hy die Snip in hierdie weer gaan sien nie. Dis moeilik genoeg om die enkele Moker waarmee hulle oefen, te sien. Ná 'n minuut se oefentyd slaan dit hom amper van sy besem af en hy moet die Greeprol gebruik om dit te vermy. Ongelukkig sien Angelina dit nie. Om die waarheid te sê, dit lyk asof sy absoluut niks sien nie. Nie een van hulle het die vaagste benul wat die res van die span doen nie. Die wind word sterker. Selfs van bo in die lug kan Harry hoor hoe die reëndruppels in die meer plons.

Angelina hou hulle vir amper 'n uur besig voor sy bes gee. Terwyl sy haar deurweekte, knorrige span terug kleedkamer toe lei, hou sy vol dat hulle nie tyd gemors het nie, maar daar is geen oortuiging in haar stem nie. Fred en George lyk besonder omgekrap. Hulle stap wydsbeen en eina-eina. Harry hoor hulle toe hy sy hare droogvryf.

"Ek dink 'n paar van myne het oopgegaan," kla Fred onderlangs.

"Myne het nie," sê George deur geklemde tande, "maar hulle klop verskriklik . . . en hulle voel nog groter as wat hulle was."

"EINA!" sê Harry.

Hy druk sy handdoek teen sy gesig, sy oë op skrefies getrek teen die pyn. Die litteken op sy voorkop is weer seer, erger as wat dit vir weke was.

"Wat gaan aan?" vra 'n paar stemme.

Harry laat sak sy handdoek. Hy het nie sy bril op nie en die kleedkamer is uit fokus, maar hy kan nog steeds sien dat almal na hom kyk.

"Niks," prewel hy, "ek – ek't my vinger in my oog gestee, dis al."

Hy kyk betekenisvol na Ron en toe die res van die span uitstap, toegewikkel in mantels en met hul hoede laag oor hul gesigte getrek, bly hy en Ron agter.

"Wat was dit?" vra Ron die oomblik toe Alicia ook uit is. "Jou litteken?"

Harry knik.

"Maar . . ." Ron lyk bang toe hy na die venster stap en na die reën daar. "Hy – hy kan nie nou hier iewers wees nie, kan hy?"

"Nee," prewel Harry. Hy gaan sit op die bank en vryf sy voorkop. "Hy's myle hiervandaan. Dis seer omdat . . . omdat hy kwaad is."

Hy was nie van plan om dit te sê nie en die woorde klink of 'n

vreemdeling dit gesê het. Tog weet hy dis waar. Hy weet nie hoe nie. Woldemort is briesend kwaad, waar hy ook al is.

“Kan jy hom sien?” vra Ron geskok. “Het jy . . . ’n visioen of iets gehad?”

Harry sit doodstil en staar na sy voete terwyl hy sy gedagtes laat gaan en sy geheue laat ontspan nā die pyn.

’n Verwarring van vorms, ’n roesemoes van stemme . . .

“Hy wil hê iets moet gebeur en dit gebeur nie gou genoeg nie,” sê hy.

Weer is hy verbaas toe hy die woorde hoor en tog is hy seker dis waar.

“Maar . . . hoe weet jy?” vra Ron.

Harry skud sy kop, laat sak sy voorkop in sy hande en druk hard oor sy oë met sy palms. Klein sterretjies verskiet voor sy oë. Hy voel hoe Ron op die bankie langs hom kom sit en weet dat Ron na hom staar.

“Is dit wat laas keer gebeur het?” vra Ron sag. “Toe jou litteken in Umbridge se kantoor seer was? Was Jy-Weet-Wie kwaad?”

Harry skud sy kop.

“Wat dan?”

Harry verplaas hom terug in sy gedagtes. Hy het in Umbridge se gesig gekyk . . . sy litteken was seer en hy het ’n snaakse gevoel in sy maag gehad . . . ’n vreemde, opwellende gevoel, ’n gelukkige gevoel . . . maar natuurlik! Hy het nie besef wat aangaan nie omdat hy so miserabel gevoel het!

“Die vorige keer was hy in sy skik,” sê hy. “Baie in sy skik. Hy’t gedink . . . iets goeds gaan gebeur. En die nag voor ons teruggekom het Hogwarts toe . . .” hy dink weer aan die oomblik in hul slaapkamer in Grimmauldplein toe sy litteken so seer was . . . “was hy smoorkwaad.”

Hy kyk om na Ron, wat hom aangaap.

“Jy kan by Trelawney oorneem, my ou,” sê hy in ’n stem vol ontsag.

“Ek maak nie voorspellings nie,” sê Harry.

“Nee, weet jy wat doen jy?” Ron klink tegelyk bang en beïndruk.

“Harry, jy lees Jy-Weet-Wie se gedagtes!”

“Nee.” Harry skud sy kop. “Dis meer soos . . . sy bui, dink ek. Ek kry flitse van die bui waarin hy is. Dompeldorius het verlede jaar gesê dis wat gebeur. Hy’t gesê ek weet wanneer Woldemort naby is of as hy iemand haat. Wel, nou weet ek ook wanneer hy tevrede is.”

Hulle word stil. Die wind en reën slaan teen die gebou.

“Jy moet vir iemand vertel,” sê Ron.

“Ek het die vorige keer vir Sirius gesê.”

“Wel, sê weer vir hom!”

"Hoe?" vra Harry geïrriteerd. "Umbridge hou die uile en die kaggels dop, onthou."

"Wel, sê dan vir Dompeldorius."

"Ek het nou net vir jou gesê hy weet klaar," sê Harry kortaf. Hy staan op, haal sy mantel van die haak af en swaai dit om hom. "Dis onnodig om dit weer vir hom te sê."

Ron maak sy mantel vas terwyl hy ingedagte na Harry staar.

"Dompeldorius sal wil weet," sê hy.

Harry haal sy skouers op. "Maak gou. . . ons moet nog die Stiltetowerspreuk gaan oefen."

Hulle hardloop sonder om te praat terug oor die donker terrein, glippend en glyend oor die modderige gras. Harry dink hard. Wat wil Woldemort hê moet gebeur wat nie gou genoeg na sy sin gebeur nie?

" . . . hy't ook ander planne . . . planne wat hy stil-stil in werking kan stel en waarop hy op die oomblik konsentreer . . . goed wat hy net in die geheim kan doen . . . soos 'n wapen . . . iets wat hy nie die vorige keer gehad het nie."

Harry het weke laas aan hierdie woorde gedink. Hy was te besig met dit wat by Hogwarts aangaan, te besig om hom teen Umbridge te verset en met die onbillikheid van die Ministerie se inmenging. . . maar nou kom dit terug en hy wonder. . . Woldemort se woede sal sin maak as hy nog nie sy hande op die wapen kon lê nie, wat dit ook al is. Het die Orde hom gedwarsboom, gekeer dat hy dit kry? Waar word dit weggesteek? Wie het dit nou?

"*Mimulus mibletonia*," ruk Ron se stem hom terug na die werklikheid en hulle klim deur die portretopening na die geselskamer.

Hermien moet vroeg gaan slaap het. Kromskeen lê opgekrul in 'n stoel en spin en 'n versameling gebreide elfhoede lê op die tafel voor die vuur. Harry is nogal verlig dat Hermien nie daar is nie. Hy is nie lus om weer oor sy litteken te praat en te moet keer as sy hom ook aanpor om na Dompeldorius te gaan nie. Ron kyk kort-kort bekommerd na hom, maar Harry haal sy Towerspreuk-handboek uit en begin sy opstel skryf. Hy maak egter net of hy konsentreer, en toe Ron gaan slaap, het hy nog amper niks geskryf nie.

Middernag kom en gaan terwyl Harry die afdeling oor die gebruike van skeurbuikgras, lavas en nieswortel oor en oor lees sonder dat hy enigiets verstaan.

Hierdie plante is bowenal effektief vir inflammasie van die brein en word dus veral in Verwarringsdrankies gebruik wanneer die towenaar besig is om heethoofdigheid en roekeloosheid te bewerkstellig.

Hermien het gesê Sirius word roekeloos, vasgevang in Grimmauldplein . . .

... bowenal effektief vir inflammasie van die brein en word dus ver-
al

die Daaglikse Profeet sal dink sy brein is aangetas as hulle
moet agterkom hy weet wat Woldemort voel

word dus veral in Verwarringsdrankies gebruik

verwar is die regte woord. Hoe weet hy wat Woldemort voel?
Wat is die eienaardige verbintenis tussen hulle wat selfs Dompel-
dorus nie heeltemal kan verklaar nie?

wanneer die towenaar begerig is

dit sal so lekker wees as hy net kan slaap

heethoofdigheid en roekeloosheid te bewerkstellig

dis warm en gemaklik in die leunstoel voor die vuur met die
reën wat nog steeds teen die ruite slaan. Kromskeen spin en die
vlamme knetter

Die boek glip uit Harry se hande en val met 'n dowwe plof op die
matjie. Sy kop sak eenkant toe

Hy stap weer in 'n gang sonder vensters, sy voetstappe weergalm in
die stilte. Die deur aan die onderkant raak groter, sy hart klop vinnig
van opwinding as hy dit net kan oopmaak kan ingaan

Hy steek sy hand uit sy vingerpunte is amper daar

"Harry Potter, meneer!"

Hy ruk wakker. Al die kerse in die geselskamer is dood, daar is
'n beweging naby hom

"Wie's daar?" Harry sit regop in sy stoel. Die vuur is amper dood
en die vertrek is pikdonker.

"Dobbi het jou uil, meneer!" sê 'n piepstemmetjie.

"Dobbi?" sê Harry slaperig en tuur deur die duister na waar die
stem vandaan kom.

Dobbi die huiself staan langs die tafel waarop Hermien 'n half-
dosyn gebreide hoede gelos het. Sy groot puntore steek uit onder
wat na al Hermien se gebreide hoede lyk. Hy het hulle oor mekaar
opgesit sodat sy kop amper 'n meter langer as gewoonlik is.
Hedwig sit op die boonste hoed en hoe-hoe tevrede. Sy lyk perdf-
fris.

"Dobbi het gesê hy sal Harry Potter se uil terugbring," sê die elf
en kyk bewonderend na Harry. "Professor Growweblaar het gesê sy
is weer gesond, meneer." Hy maak 'n diep buiging sodat sy skerp
neus omtrent aan die afgeleefde mat raak. Hedwig hoe-hoe veront-
waardig en fladder na Harry se stoel.

"Dankie, Dobbi!" Harry streel Hedwig se kop en knipper sy oë.
Dis moeilik om die droombeeld van die deur uit sy gedagtes te kry
dit was baie werklik. Hy bekyk vir Dobbi en sien dat die elf ook

enlike serpe en 'n groot klomp sokkies dra, sodat sy voete heeltemal te groot vir sy lyf lyk.

"Hm... wat jy al die klere wat Hermien hier los?"

"O nee, meneer," sê Dobbi vrolik. "Dobbi gee vir Knipogies ook daarvan."

"O, hoe gaan dit met Knipogies?" gaap Harry.

Dobbi se ore hang effens.

"Knipogies drink nog baie, meneer," sê hy treurig en sy enorme oë, so groot soos tennisballe, staar na die vloer. "Sy wil nog steeds nie klere hê nie, Harry Potter. Ook nie die ander huiselwe nie. Niemand wil meer vir Griffindor-toring skoonmaak nie, nie met al die hoede en sokkies wat weggesteek word nie, dis 'n belediging, meneer. Dobbi doen nou alles, meneer, maar Dobbi gee nie om nie, meneer, hy hoop om vir Harry Potter raak te loop en vannag het sy wens waar geword, meneer!" Dobbi buig weer laag. "Maar Harry Potter lyk nie gelukkig nie," sê Dobbi toe hy orent kom. Hy kyk bedees na Harry. "Dobbi het gehoor hoe hy in sy slaap mompel. Het Harry Potter nare drome?"

"Nie naar nie," sê Harry en vryf sy oë. "Ek het al erger drome gehad."

Die elf kyk na Harry met sy groot ronde oë. Toe sê hy baie ernstig: "Dobbi wens hy kan vir Harry Potter help, want Harry Potter het vir Dobbi vrygemaak en Dobbi is nou baie gelukkiger."

Harry glimlag.

"Jy kan my nie help nie, Dobbi, maar dankie in elk geval."

Hy buk en tel sy Towerdrankieboek op. Hy sal die opstel môre skryf. Hy maak die boek toe en net toe verlig die laaste gloed van die vuur die wit littekens agter op sy hand – die gevolg van sy tectensie by Umbridge.

"Wag 'n bietjie – daar is iets wat jy vir my kan doen, Dobbi," sê Harry stadig.

Die elf kyk stralend om.

"Wat, Harry Potter, meneer?"

"Ek soek 'n plek waar agt-en-twintig mense Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste kan oefen sonder dat een van die onderwysers ons kry. Veral nie," Harry klem die boek so styf vas dat sy littekens wit uitstaan, "professor Umbridge nie."

Harry het verwag dat die elf se glimlag sal verdwyn en sy ore sal hang. Hy het verwag dat die elf gaan sê dis onmoontlik of dat hy sal sien wat hy kan doen. Hy het nie verwag dat Dobbi in die lug gaan spring terwyl hy sy ore vrolik wikkel en sy hande klap nie.

"Dobbi weet net waar, meneer!" sê hy vrolik. "Dobbi het die ander elwe hoor praat toe hy Hogwarts toe gekom het, meneer. Dit word die Kom-en-gaan-kamer genoem, meneer, of die Vertrek van Vereistes!"

“Hoekom?” vra Harry nuuskierig.

“Omdat jy die vertrek net kan binnegaan as jy dit regtig nodig het,” sê Dobbi. “Soms is dit daar en soms nie, maar as dit daar is, het dit altyd alles wat jy nodig het. Dobbi het dit ook al gebruik, meneer,” sy stem sak en hy lyk skuldig. “as Knipogies baie dronk is. Hy het haar in die Vertrek van Vereistes weggsteek en dan is daar teenmiddels vir Botterbier, meneer, en ’n elfgrootte bed waarop sy kan slaap, meneer. en Dobbi weet meneer Fillis het al ekstra skoonmaakgoed daarin gekry as hy te min het, meneer, en –”

“En as jy onverwags toilet toe moet gaan,” sê Harry, wat skielik onthou wat Dompeldorius die vorige jaar tydens die Kersbal gesê het, “dan is dit vol kamerpote?”

“Dobbi sou so dink, meneer.” Dobbi knik gewigtig. “Dis ’n baie besondere kamer, meneer.”

“Hoeveel mense weet daarvan?” vra Harry en sit regopper.

“Baie min, meneer. Die meeste mense kom toevallig daarop af as hulle iets moet hê, maar gewoonlik kry hulle dit nooit weer nie, want hulle weet nie dis altyd daar vir wie dit ook al nodig het nie, meneer.”

“Dit klink wonderlik,” sê Harry en sy hart klop vinniger. “Dit klink perfek, Dobbi. Wanneer kan jy vir my wys waar dit is?”

“Enige tyd, Harry Potter, meneer.” Dobbie lyk hoog in sy noppies. “Ons kan nou gaan as jy wil!”

Harry is vir ’n oomblik in die versoeking. Hy staan op uit sy stoel met die gedagte om sy onsigbaarheidsmantel te gaan haal, toe ’n stem baie soos Hermien s’n in sy oor fluister: *roekeloos*. En nie vir die eerste keer nie. Dis baie laat en hy is doodmoeg en hy moet ook nog Snerp se opstel klaarmaak.

“Nie vannag nie, Dobbi,” sê hy teësinig en sak terug in sy stoel. “Dis baie belangrik. Ek wil dit nie opmors nie, ek moet dit behoorlik beplan. Hoor hier, kan jy vir my sê presies waar hierdie Vertrek van Vereistes is en hoe om dit te kry?”

Hul klede warrel en bol in die wind toe hulle vir dubbele Herbologie deur die oorstroomde groentetuin plas. Hulle kan professor Spruit skaars hoor oor die gehamer van reëndruppels wat soos haelstene op die kweekhuis se dak kletter. Die middag se Versorging van Magiese Creature-les word verskuif van die speelterrein na ’n leë klaskamer op die grondverdieping, en tot Harry se verligting soek Angelina haar spanlede tydens middagete op om te sê dat die Kwiddiekoefening gekanselleer is.

“Goed,” sê hy saggies vir haar, “want ons het ’n plek vir ons eerste Verdedigingsbyeenkoms gekry. Vanaand om agtuur op die sewende

vloer oorkant daardie tapisserie waarop Barnabas die Besetene deur die trolle geslaan word. Sal jy vir Katie en Alicia sê?”

Angelina lyk effens uit die veld geslaan, maar belowe om die boodskap oor te dra. Harry val hongerig weg aan sy wors en kapok-aantappels. Toe hy opkyk om 'n sluk pampoensap te vat, sien hy dat Hermien na hom staan.

“Wat?” vra hy bot.

“Wel... dis net dat Dobbi se planne nie altyd so lekker werk nie. Othou jy die keer toe jy al die bene in jou arm verloor het?”

“Die kamer is nie een van Dobbi se mal idees nie. Dompeldorius weet ook daarvan. Hy't laas jaar by die Kersbal daarvan gepraat.”

Dit lyk of dit Hermien beter laat voel.

“Dan het Dompeldorius vir jou daarvan gesê?”

“So terloops,” sê Harry skouerophalend.

“O, wel, dan is alles reg,” sê Hermien en sy opper geen verdere besware nie.

Die res van die dag soek hulle die mense wat die lys in Die Wynenes geteken het om vir hulle te sê waarheen hulle die aand moet gaan. Harry is spyt toe Ginny vir Cho en haar vriendin eerste kry, maar ná aandete weet hy dat al vyf-en-twintig mense wat in Die Wynenes was, die boodskap gekry het.

Ten halfagt verlaat Harry, Ron en Hermien die Griffindor-geselskamer. Harry hou 'n stuk ou perkament vas. Vyfdejaars mag tot nege-uur in die gange wees, maar al drie kyk nietemin senuagtig rond terwyl hulle na die sewende verdieping stap.

“Wag eers,” waarsku Harry toe hulle by die boonste trap kom. Hy vou die perkament oop, tik dit met sy towerstaf en prewel: “*Ek belowe plegtig om moles te maak.*”

'n Kaart van Hogwarts verskyn op die skoon perkament. Bewegende swart kolletjies met name wys waar mense is.

“Fillis is op die tweede verdieping,” sê Harry. Hy hou die kaart naby sy oë. “En mevrou Norris is op die vierde.”

“En Umbridge?” vra Hermien benoud.

“In haar kantoor. Goed, kom ons gaan.”

Hulle stap vinnig met die gang af na die plek wat Dobbi vir Harry beskryf het. Dis 'n lang kaal muur oorkant 'n enorme tapisserie wat wys hoe die stomme Barnabas trolle leer ballet doen. 'n Motgevrete trol hou 'n rukkie op om die voornemende balletonderwyser met sy knuppel te slaan en staan na hulle.

“Goed, Dobbi het gesê ons moet drie keer verby hierdie muur stap en hard dink aan wat ons nodig het,” fluister Harry.

Hulle doen dit. Hulle draai skerp by die venster net anderkant die

kaal stuk muur en weer by die manshoë vaas aan die oorkant. Ron se oë is op skrefies getrek van pure konsentrasie, Hermien prewel binnensmonds en Harry bal sy vuiste terwyl hy stip voor hom kyk.

Ons moet iewers hê om te leer veg . . . dink hy. *'n Plek om te oefen iewers waar hulle ons nie kan kry nie.*

“Harry!” sê Hermien skerp toe hulle die derde keer omdraai.

’n Glansende deur het in die muur verskyn. Ron staar verskrik daarna. Harry steek sy hand uit, vat die koperhandvatsel vas, maak die deur oop en stap in ’n ruim vertrek vol fakkels soos dié wat die kerkers op die onderste verdieping verlig.

Die mure is bedek met boekrakke van hout en pleks van stoele lê daar groot sykussings op die vloer. Op ’n paar rakke aan die oorkant van die vertrek lê instrumente soos kulklikkers, geheime sensors en ’n groot gekraakte vyandglas wat Harry seker is die vorige jaar in die vals Moodie se kantoor gehang het.

“Dit sal goed wees as ons Uitkloppers oefen,” sê Ron in sy skik en beduie na die kussings.

“Kyk net al die boekel!” sê Hermien opgewonde. Sy trek haar vinger oor die groot dik boeke se leerrugkante. “’n Samevatting van *Algemene Vloeke en hul Teenvloeke* . . . *Verkul die Donker Kunste* . . . *Spreuke ter Selfverdediging* . . . sjoe . . .” Sy kyk stralend na Harry. Dis duidelik dat die honderde boeke haar oortuig het hulle doen die regte ding. “Harry, dis wonderlik, ons het alles wat ons moet hê!”

Sy trek *Vloeke vir Vervloektes* onmiddellik uit die rak, gaan sit op die naaste kussing en begin lees.

Daar is ’n ligte kloppie aan die deur. Harry kyk om. Ginny, Neville, Hildegard, Parvati en Dean het opgedaag.

“Sjoe,” sê Dean en kyk verwonderd rond. “Watse plek is dit?”

Harry begin verduidelik, maar voor hy klaar is, kom nog mense in en hy moet van voor af begin. Teen die tyd dat dit agtuur is, is al die kussings vol. Harry stap na die deur en draai die sleutel. Dit gaan knarsend toe en almal word stil en kyk na hom. Hermien merk haar plek in *Vloeke vir Vervloektes* en sit dit opsy.

“Wel,” sê Harry effens senuagtig. “Dis die plek wat ek vir ons oefensessies gekry het en dit lyk of julle – hm – darem dink dis oukei.”

“Dis fantasties!” sê Cho en ’n hele paar mense stem saam.

“Dis bisar,” sê Fred terwyl hy fronsend rondkyk. “Ons het eenkeer hier vir Fillis weggekrui, onthou jy, George? Maar toe was dit net ’n besemkas.”

“Haai, Harry, wat is al die goed?” vra Dean agter in die kamer. Hy wys na die kulklikkers en die vyandglas.

“Donker verklikkers,” sê Harry. Hy vleg deur die kussings na

agter: "Hulle wys vir jou wanneer daar Donker towenaars of vyande is, maar jy kan nie heeltemal op hulle staatmaak nie, hulle kan ge-
kap word."

Hy kyk 'n rukkie in die gekraakte vyandglas. Skaduagtige figure beweeg binne-in rond. Hy herken niemand nie en draai weg.

"Wel, ek het 'n bietjie gedink oor wat ons eerste moet doen en –
him." Hy sien 'n hand. "Ja, Hermien?"

"Ek dink ons moet 'n leier kies," sê Hermien.

"Harry is die leier," sê Cho dadelik en sy kyk na Hermien asof sy
getik is.

Harry se maag slaan bollemakiesie.

"Ja, maar ons moet behoorlik daaroor stem," sê Hermien onver-
stoord. "Dit maak dit formeel en gee hom gesag. Oukei – almal wat
dink Harry moet ons leier wees?"

Al die hande gaan op, selfs Sagrys Smit s'n, hoewel effens halfhar-
tig.

"Ihm – goed, dankie," sê Harry, wat voel hoe hy bloos. "En – wat,
Hermien?"

"Ek dink ook ons moet 'n naam hê," sê sy helder, haar hand nog
steeds in die lug. "Dit sal 'n gevoel van spangees gee en eenheid bou."

"Wat van Die Anti-Umbridge Liga?" stel Angelina voor.

"Of Die Ministerie vir Towerkuns is Morone-groep?" sê Fred.

"Ek het gedink," sê Hermien en sy frons vir Fred, "aan 'n soort
naam wat nie vir almal sal sê wat ons doen nie en wat ons met vei-
ligheid kan gebruik."

"Die Soldate," stel Cho voor. "DS. Niemand sal weet waarvan ons
praat nie."

"Ja, Die Soldate klink goed," sê Ginny, "maar kom ons sê eerder
dit staan vir Dompeldorius se Soldate, dis mos waarvoor die
Ministerie bang is, of hoe? 'n Soort weermag."

Almal lag en maak instemmende geluide.

"Almal ten gunste van die DS?" sê Hermien baasspelerig. Sy staan
op haar knieë en tel. "Dis 'n meerderheid – die mosie is goedgekeur!"

Sy steek die stuk perkament met hulle handtekeninge teen die
muur vas en skryf in groot letters boaan:

DOMPELDORIUS SE SOLDATE

"Goed," sê Harry toe sy gaan sit, "sal ons begin oefen? Ek het gedink
die eerste ding wat ons moet leer, is *Expelliarmus*. Julle weet, die
Ontwapenspreuk. Ek weet dis baie basies, maar dit het my baie ge-
help –"

“Gee my krag,” sê Sagrys. Hy rol sy oë en kruis sy arms. “Ek dink nie *Expelliarmus* gaan ons teen Jy-Weet-Wie help nie.”

“Ek het dit teen hom gebruik,” sê Harry afgemete. “In Junie. Dit het my lewe gered.”

Smit se mond gaap oop en die res van die vertrek is doodstil.

“Maar as jy dink jy’s te goed daarvoor, kan jy loop,” sê Harry.

Smit roer nie. En ook nie iemand anders nie.

“Oukei,” sê Harry, sy mond effens droër as gewoonlik terwyl al die oë op hom rus. “Ek stel voor ons verdeel in pare en begin oefen.”

Dit voel snaaks om instruksies te gee, maar nie naastenby so snaaks as om te sien hoe sy instruksies uitgevoer word nie. Almal staan onmiddellik op en verdeel in pare. Net Neville bly oor.

“Jy kan teen my oefen,” sê Harry. “Goed – ek tel drie – een, twee, drie –”

Krete van *Expelliarmus* weergalm deur die vertrek. Towerstafwe trek in alle rigtings, towerspreuke wat die teiken gemis het, tref die boeke op die rakke en blaas hulle deur die vertrek.

Harry is te vinnig vir Neville, wie se towerstaf uit sy hand skiet en kletterend op ’n boekrak val. Harry moet die Ontbiedtower-spreuk gebruik om dit terug te kry. Toe hy rondkyk, besef hy hy was reg om met basiese toorwerk te begin. Baie mense kry dit glad nie reg om hul maats te ontwapen nie en laat hulle bloot rondspring soos hulle vir die flitsende spreuke koes.

“*Expelliarmus!*” sê Neville en Harry, wat onkant betrap is, se towerstaf vlieg uit sy hand.

“EK HET DIT REGGEKRY!” sê Neville verras. “Ek het dit nog nooit tevore gedoen nie – EK HET DIT REGGEKRY!”

“Mooi so!” sê Harry bemoedigend en besluit om nie vir Neville te sê dat jou teëstander in ’n regte tweegeveg nie sal wegkyk met sy towerstaf slap langs sy sy nie. “Hoor hier, Neville, maak ’n rukkie beurte met Ron en Hermien. Ek wil rondstap en kyk wat die ander mense doen.”

Harry stap na die middel van die vertrek. Iets baie snaaks is met Sagrys Smit aan die gang. Elke keer dat hy sy mond oopmaak om vir Antonie Goldstein te ontwapen, vlieg sy eie towerstaf uit sy hand sonder dat Antonie ’n geluid gemaak het. Dit neem Harry nie lank om agter te kom wat aangaan nie: Fred en George staan ’n entjie agter Smit en maak beurte om hom te toor.

“Jammer, Harry,” sê George toe Harry sy oog vang. “Kon dit nie weerstaan nie.”

Harry stap na die ander pare en probeer die mense help wat die towerspreuk verkeerd doen. Ginny oefen teen Michael Corner. Sy vaar baie goed, terwyl Michael óf baie swak óf onwillig is om haar

te toor. Ernie Macmillan swaai sy towerstaf onnodig swierig sodat Parvati kans kry om hom onverhoeds te betrap. Die Creevey-broers is vol ywer maar wisselvallig, en dis hulle wat die meeste van die hocke van die rakke laat vlieg. Mania Goedlief is so-so: die een oomblik vlieg Justin Finch-Fletchley se towerstaf uit sy hand en dan gaan sy hare weer in die lug.

“Oukei, stop!” skree Harry. “Stop! STOP!”

Ek kort ’n fluitjie, dink hy net toe hy een op die naaste boekrak sien lê. Hy tel dit op en blaas hard. Almal laat sak hul towerstawwe.

“Dit was nie sleg nie,” sê Harry, “maar julle kan verbeter.” Sagrys gluur na hom. “Kom ons probeer weer.”

Harry stap weer deur die vertrek en gaan staan hier en daar om voorstelle te maak. Die mense verbeter stadig maar seker. Hy gaan oers nie na Cho en haar vriendin nie, maar nadat hy twee keer by al die ander was, voel hy hy kan hulle nie meer ignoreer nie.

“O nee,” sê Cho wild toe hy nader kom. “Expelliarmious! Ek bedoel, Expellimellius! Ek – o jammer, Marietta!”

Haar vriendin met die krulhare se mou het aan die brand geslaan. Marietta blus dit gou met haar towerstaf en gluur na Harry asof dit sy skuld was.

“Jy maak my senuagtig, Harry, ek was heel oukei!” sê Cho verwyttend.

“Dit was nogal goed,” lieg Harry. Maar toe sy haar wenkbroue lig, sê hy: “Wel, nee, dit was nogal sleg, maar ek weet jy kan dit doen. Ek het netnou van dáár af gesien.”

Sy lag. Haar vriendin kyk suur na hulle en draai weg.

“Moet jou nie aan haar steur nie,” fluister Cho. “Sy wil nie eintlik hier wees nie, ek het haar saamgesleep. Haar ma-hulle het haar verbied om enigiets te doen wat vir Umbridge kan omkrap. Jy sien, haar ma werk by die Ministerie.

“Wat van jou ouers?” vra Harry.

“Hulle het my ook verbied,” Cho steek haar ken in die lug. “Maar as hulle dink ek gaan my nie teen Jy-Weet-Wie verset ná wat met Cedric –”

Sy word stil en lyk verward. ’n Ongemaklike stilte hang tussen hulle. Terry Boot se towerstaf gons verby Harry se kop en tref vir Alicia Spinnet hard op die neus.

“Wel, my pa is vir enige anti-Ministerie-aksiel” sê Mania Goedlief reg agter Harry. Dis duidelik dat sy afgeluister het terwyl Justin Finch-Fletchley sukkel om hom uit die voue van sy kleed wat oor sy kop gewaai het, te wikkel. “Hy sê altyd Broddelwerk is tot enigiets in staat. Ek bedoel, met al die gnome wat Broddelwerk al vermoor het!”

En hy gebruik die Departement van Geheime om die naaste giftowwe te ontwikkel wat hy in die geheim vir mense voer wat nie met hom saamstem nie. En dan's daar die Onglobulêre Steeksnyer – ”

“Moenie haar uitvra nie,” mompel Harry vir Cho toe sy verward haar mond oopmaak. Cho giggel.

“Haai, Harry,” roep Hermien van die oorkant van die vertrek. “Weet jy hoe laat dit is?”

Harry kyk na sy horlosie en is geskok toe hy sien dis reeds tien oor nege. Dit beteken hulle moet dadelik na hul geselskamers gaan of die risiko loop dat Fillis hulle vang en straf. Hy blaas sy fluitjie en almal hou op om “*Expelliarmus*” te skree. Die laaste paar towerstawwe kletter grond toe.

“Dit was baie goed,” sê Harry, “maar ons is laat, ons moet loop. Dieselfde tyd, dieselfde plek volgende week?”

“Gouer!” sê Dean Thomas gretig en baie mense knik.

Maar Angelina sê egter vinnig: “Die Kwiddiekseisoen begin binnekort. Ons moet tyd hê vir spanoefeninge!”

“Kom ons sê dan volgende Woensdagaand,” sê Harry. “Ons kan later besluit of ons ekstra klasse gaan hê. Kom, ons moet weg wees.”

Hy haal die Plunderaar se Kaart uit en kyk of daar enige teken van onderwysers op die sewende verdieping is. Hy laat hulle in groepe van drie of vier gaan en hou die kollelijies angstig dop tot hulle veilig in hul slaapsale is. Die Hoesenproesers gaan na die keldergang wat ook na die kombuis lei, die Raweklouers na 'n toring aan die westekant van die kasteel en die Griffindors in die gang af na die Vet Vrou se portret.

“Dit was baie, baie goed, Harry,” sê Hermien toe net sy, Harry en Ron agterbly.

“Ja, dit was omtrent!” sê Ron entoesiasties terwyl hulle by die deur uitglip en kyk hoe dit agter hulle wegsmelt en weer klip word. “Het jy gesien hoe ek vir Hermien ontwapen het, Harry?”

“Net een keer,” sê Hermien ontstoke. “Ek het jou baie meer kere gekry as – ”

“Ek het jou nie net een keer gekry nie, ek het jou minstens drie keer – ”

“Wel, as jy die keer tel toe jy oor jou eie voete geval en my towerstaf uit my hand gestamp het – ”

Hulle baklei die hele ent tot by die geselskamer, maar Harry luister nie na hulle nie. Hy hou een oog op die Plunderaar se Kaart terwyl hy dink aan hoe Cho gesê het dat hy haar senuagtig maak.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



THE LION AND THE SERPENT

Harry felt as though he were carrying some kind of talisman inside his chest over the following two weeks, a glowing secret that supported him through Umbridge's classes and even made it possible for him to smile blandly as he looked into her horrible bulging eyes. He and the D.A. were resisting her under her very nose, doing the very thing that she and the Ministry most feared, and whenever he was supposed to be reading Wilbert Slinkhard's book during her lessons he dwelled instead on satisfying memories of their most recent meetings, remembering how Neville had successfully disarmed Hermione, how Colin Creevey had mastered the

Impediment Jinx after three meetings' hard effort, how Parvati Patil had produced such a good Reductor Curse that she had reduced the table carrying all the Sneakoscopes to dust.

He was finding it almost impossible to fix a regular night of the week for D.A. meetings, as they had to accommodate three separate Quidditch teams' practices, which were often rearranged depending on the weather conditions; but Harry was not sorry about this, he had a feeling that it was probably better to keep the timing of their meetings unpredictable. If anyone was watching them, it would be hard to make out a pattern.

Hermione soon devised a very clever method of communicating the time and date of the next meeting to all the members in case they needed to change it at short notice, because it would look so suspicious if people from different Houses were seen crossing the Great Hall to talk to each other too often. She gave each of the members of the D.A. a fake Galleon (Ron became very excited when he saw the basket at first, convinced that she was actually giving out gold).

"You see the numerals around the edge of the coins?" Hermione said, holding one up for examination at the end of their fourth meeting. The coin gleamed fat and yellow in the light from the torches. "On real Galleons that's just a serial number referring to the goblin who cast the coin. On these fake coins, though, the numbers will change to reflect the time and date of the next meeting. The coins will grow hot when the date changes, so if you're carrying them in a pocket you'll be able to feel them. We take one each, and when Harry sets the date of the next meeting he'll change the numbers on *his* coin,

and because I've put a Protean Charm on them, they'll all change to mimic his."

A blank silence greeted Hermione's words. She looked around at all the faces upturned to her, rather disconcerted.

"Well — I thought it was a good idea," she said uncertainly, "I mean, even if Umbridge asked us to turn out our pockets, there's nothing fishy about carrying a Galleon, is there? But . . . well, if you don't want to use them . . ."

"You can do a Protean Charm?" said Terry Boot.

"Yes," said Hermione.

"But that's . . . that's N.E.W.T. standard, that is," he said weakly.

"Oh," said Hermione, trying to look modest. "Oh . . . well . . . yes, I suppose it is . . ."

"How come you're not in Ravenclaw?" he demanded, staring at Hermione with something close to wonder. "With brains like yours?"

"Well, the Sorting Hat did seriously consider putting me in Ravenclaw during my Sorting," said Hermione brightly, "but it decided on Gryffindor in the end. So does that mean we're using the Galleons?"

There was a murmur of assent and everybody moved forward to collect one from the basket. Harry looked sideways at Hermione.

"You know what these remind me of?"

"No, what's that?"

"The Death Eaters' scars. Voldemort touches one of them, and all their scars burn, and they know they've got to join him."

"Well . . . yes," said Hermione quietly. "That *is* where I got the idea . . . but you'll notice I decided to engrave the date on bits of

metal rather than on our members' skin. . . .”

“Yeah . . . I prefer your way,” said Harry, grinning, as he slipped his Galleon into his pocket. “I suppose the only danger with these is that we might accidentally spend them.”

“Fat chance,” said Ron, who was examining his own fake Galleon with a slightly mournful air. “I haven’t got any real Galleons to confuse it with.”

As the first Quidditch match of the season, Gryffindor versus Slytherin, drew nearer, their D.A. meetings were put on hold because Angelina insisted on almost daily practices. The fact that the Quidditch Cup had not been held for so long added considerably to the interest and excitement surrounding the forthcoming game. The Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were taking a lively interest in the outcome, for they, of course, would be playing both teams over the coming year; and the Heads of House of the competing teams, though they attempted to disguise it under a decent pretense of sportsmanship, were determined to see their side’s victory. Harry realized how much Professor McGonagall cared about beating Slytherin when she abstained from giving them homework in the week leading up to the match.

“I think you’ve got enough to be getting on with at the moment,” she said loftily. Nobody could quite believe their ears until she looked directly at Harry and Ron and said grimly, “I’ve become accustomed to seeing the Quidditch Cup in my study, boys, and I really don’t want to have to hand it over to Professor Snape, so use the extra time to practice, won’t you?”

Snape was no less obviously partisan. He had booked the

Quidditch pitch for Slytherin practice so often that the Gryffindors had difficulty getting on it to play. He was also turning a deaf ear to the many reports of Slytherin attempts to hex Gryffindor players in the corridors. When Alicia Spinnet turned up in the hospital wing with her eyebrows growing so thick and fast that they obscured her vision and obstructed her mouth, Snape insisted that she must have attempted a Hair-Thickening Charm on herself and refused to listen to the fourteen eyewitnesses who insisted that they had seen the Slytherin Keeper, Miles Bletchley, hit her from behind with a jinx while she worked in the library.

Harry felt optimistic about Gryffindor's chances; they had, after all, never lost to Malfoy's team. Admittedly Ron was still not performing to Wood's standard, but he was working extremely hard to improve. His greatest weakness was a tendency to lose confidence when he made a blunder; if he let in one goal he became flustered and was therefore likely to miss more. On the other hand, Harry had seen Ron make some truly spectacular saves when he was on form. During one memorable practice, he had hung one-handed from his broom and kicked the Quaffle so hard away from the goal hoop that it soared the length of the pitch and through the center hoop at the other end. The rest of the team felt this save compared favorably with one made recently by Barry Ryan, the Irish International Keeper, against Poland's top Chaser, Ladislav Zamojski. Even Fred had said that Ron might yet make him and George proud, and that they were seriously considering admitting that he was related to them, something he assured Ron they had been trying to deny for four years.

The only thing really worrying Harry was how much Ron was

allowing the tactics of the Slytherin team to upset him before they even got onto the pitch. Harry, of course, had endured their snide comments for more than four years, so whispers of, "Hey, Potty, I heard Warrington's sworn to knock you off your broom on Saturday," far from chilling his blood, made him laugh. "Warrington's aim's so pathetic I'd be more worried if he was aiming for the person next to me," he retorted, which made Ron and Hermione laugh and wiped the smirk off Pansy Parkinson's face.

But Ron had never endured a relentless campaign of insults, jeers, and intimidation. When Slytherins, some of them seventh years and considerably larger than he was, muttered as they passed in the corridors, "Got your bed booked in the hospital wing, Weasley?" he did not laugh, but turned a delicate shade of green. When Draco Malfoy imitated Ron dropping the Quaffle (which he did whenever they were within sight of each other), Ron's ears glowed red and his hands shook so badly that he was likely to drop whatever he was holding at the time too.

October extinguished itself in a rush of howling winds and driving rain and November arrived, cold as frozen iron, with hard frosts every morning and icy drafts that bit at exposed hands and faces. The skies and the ceiling of the Great Hall turned a pale, pearly gray, the mountains around Hogwarts became snowcapped, and the temperature in the castle dropped so far that many students wore their thick protective dragon skin gloves in the corridors between lessons.

The morning of the match dawned bright and cold. When Harry awoke he looked around at Ron's bed and saw him sitting bolt upright, his arms around his knees, staring fixedly into space.

“You all right?” said Harry.

Ron nodded but did not speak. Harry was reminded forcibly of the time that Ron had accidentally put a slug-vomiting charm on himself. He looked just as pale and sweaty as he had done then, not to mention as reluctant to open his mouth.

“You just need some breakfast,” Harry said bracingly. “C’mon.”

The Great Hall was filling up fast when they arrived, the talk louder and the mood more exuberant than usual. As they passed the Slytherin table there was an upsurge of noise; Harry looked around and saw that nearly everyone there was wearing, in addition to the usual green-and-silver scarves and hats, silver badges in the shape of what seemed to be crowns. For some reason many of them waved at Ron, laughing uproariously. Harry tried to see what was written on the badges as he walked by, but he was too concerned to get Ron past their table quickly to linger long enough to read them.

They received a rousing welcome at the Gryffindor table, where everyone was wearing red and gold, but far from raising Ron’s spirits the cheers seemed to sap the last of his morale; he collapsed onto the nearest bench looking as though he were facing his final meal.

“I must’ve been mental to do this,” he said in a croaky whisper. “*Mental.*”

“Don’t be thick,” said Harry firmly, passing him a choice of cereals. “You’re going to be fine. It’s normal to be nervous.”

“I’m rubbish,” croaked Ron. “I’m lousy. I can’t play to save my life. What was I thinking?”

“Get a grip,” said Harry sternly. “Look at that save you made with

your foot the other day, even Fred and George said it was brilliant —”

Ron turned a tortured face to Harry.

“That was an accident,” he whispered miserably. “I didn’t mean to do it — I slipped off my broom when none of you were looking and I was trying to get back on and I kicked the Quaffle by accident.”

“Well,” said Harry, recovering quickly from this unpleasant surprise, “a few more accidents like that and the game’s in the bag, isn’t it?”

Hermione and Ginny sat down opposite them wearing red-and-gold scarves, gloves, and rosettes.

“How’re you feeling?” Ginny asked Ron, who was now staring into the dregs of milk at the bottom of his empty cereal bowl as though seriously considering attempting to drown himself in them.

“He’s just nervous,” said Harry.

“Well, that’s a good sign, I never feel you perform as well in exams if you’re not a bit nervous,” said Hermione heartily.

“Hello,” said a vague and dreamy voice from behind them. Harry looked up: Luna Lovegood had drifted over from the Ravenclaw table. Many people were staring at her and a few openly laughing and pointing; she had managed to procure a hat shaped like a life-size lion’s head, which was perched precariously on her head.

“I’m supporting Gryffindor,” said Luna, pointing unnecessarily at her hat. “Look what it does . . .”

She reached up and tapped the hat with her wand. It opened its mouth wide and gave an extremely realistic roar that made everyone in the vicinity jump.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” said Luna happily. “I wanted to have it chewing up a serpent to represent Slytherin, you know, but there wasn’t time. Anyway . . . good luck, Ronald!”

She drifted away. They had not quite recovered from the shock of Luna’s hat before Angelina came hurrying toward them, accompanied by Katie and Alicia, whose eyebrows had mercifully been returned to normal by Madam Pomfrey.

“When you’re ready,” she said, “we’re going to go straight down to the pitch, check out conditions and change.”

“We’ll be there in a bit,” Harry assured her. “Ron’s just got to have some breakfast.”

It became clear after ten minutes, however, that Ron was not capable of eating anything more and Harry thought it best to get him down to the changing rooms. As they rose from the table, Hermione got up too, and taking Harry’s arm, she drew him to one side.

“Don’t let Ron see what’s on those Slytherins’ badges,” she whispered urgently.

Harry looked questioningly at her, but she shook her head warningly; Ron had just ambled over to them, looking lost and desperate.

“Good luck, Ron,” said Hermione, standing on tiptoe and kissing him on the cheek. “And you, Harry —”

Ron seemed to come to himself slightly as they walked back across the Great Hall. He touched the spot on his face where Hermione had kissed him, looking puzzled, as though he was not quite sure what had just happened. He seemed too distracted to notice much around him, but Harry cast a curious glance at the

crown-shaped badges as they passed the Slytherin table, and this time he made out the words etched onto them:



With an unpleasant feeling that this could mean nothing good, he hurried Ron across the entrance hall, down the stone steps, and out into the icy air.

The frosty grass crunched under their feet as they hurried down the sloping lawns toward the stadium. There was no wind at all and the sky was a uniform pearly white, which meant that visibility would be good without the drawback of direct sunlight in the eyes. Harry pointed out these encouraging factors to Ron as they walked, but he was not sure that Ron was listening.

Angelina had changed already and was talking to the rest of the team when they entered. Harry and Ron pulled on their robes (Ron attempted to do his up back-to-front for several minutes before Alicia took pity on him and went to help) and then sat down to listen to the pre-match talk while the babble of voices outside grew steadily louder as the crowd came pouring out of the castle toward the pitch.

“Okay, I’ve only just found out the final lineup for Slytherin,” said Angelina, consulting a piece of parchment. “Last year’s Beaters, Derrick and Bole, have left now, but it looks as though Montague’s replaced them with the usual gorillas, rather than anyone who can fly particularly well. They’re two blokes called Crabbe and Goyle, I

don't know much about them —”

“We do,” said Harry and Ron together.

“Well, they don't look bright enough to tell one end of a broom from another,” said Angelina, pocketing her parchment, “but then I was always surprised Derrick and Bole managed to find their way onto the pitch without signposts.”

“Crabbe and Goyle are in the same mold,” Harry assured her.

They could hear hundreds of footsteps mounting the banked benches of the spectators' stands now. Some people were singing, though Harry could not make out the words. He was starting to feel nervous, but he knew his butterflies were as nothing to Ron's, who was clutching his stomach and staring straight ahead again, his jaw set and his complexion pale gray.

“It's time,” said Angelina in a hushed voice, looking at her watch. “C'mon everyone . . . good luck.”

The team rose, shouldered their brooms, and marched in single file out of the changing room and into the dazzling sky. A roar of sound greeted them in which Harry could still hear singing, though it was muffled by the cheers and whistles.

The Slytherin team were standing waiting for them. They too were wearing those silver crown-shaped badges. The new captain, Montague, was built along the same lines as Dudley, with massive forearms like hairy hams. Behind him lurked Crabbe and Goyle, almost as large, blinking stupidly, swinging their new Beaters' bats. Malfoy stood to one side, the sunlight gleaming on his white-blond head. He caught Harry's eye and smirked, tapping the crown-shaped badge on his chest.

“Captains shake hands,” ordered the umpire, Madam Hooch, as Angelina and Montague reached each other. Harry could tell that Montague was trying to crush Angelina’s fingers, though she did not wince. “Mount your brooms . . .”

Madam Hooch placed her whistle in her mouth and blew.

The balls were released and the fourteen players shot upward; out of the corner of his eye Harry saw Ron streak off toward the goal hoops. He zoomed higher, dodging a Bludger, and set off on a wide lap of the pitch, gazing around for a glint of gold; on the other side of the stadium, Draco Malfoy was doing exactly the same.

“And it’s Johnson, Johnson with the Quaffle, what a player that girl is, I’ve been saying it for years but she still won’t go out with me —”

“JORDAN!” yelled Professor McGonagall.

“Just a fun fact, Professor, adds a bit of interest — and she’s ducked Warrington, she’s passed Montague, she’s — ouch — been hit from behind by a Bludger from Crabbe. . . . Montague catches the Quaffle, Montague heading back up the pitch and — nice Bludger there from George Weasley, that’s a Bludger to the head for Montague, he drops the Quaffle, caught by Katie Bell, Katie Bell of Gryffindor reverse passes to Alicia Spinnet and Spinnet’s away —”

Lee Jordan’s commentary rang through the stadium and Harry listened as hard as he could through the wind whistling in his ears and the din of the crowd, all yelling and booing and singing —

“— dodges Warrington, avoids a Bludger — close call, Alicia — and the crowd are loving this, just listen to them, what’s that they’re singing?”

And as Lee paused to listen the song rose loud and clear from the

sea of green and silver in the Slytherin section of the stands:

*Weasley cannot save a thing,
He cannot block a single ring,
That's why Slytherins all sing:
Weasley is our King.*

*Weasley was born in a bin,
He always lets the Quaffle in,
Weasley will make sure we win,
Weasley is our King.*

“— and Alicia passes back to Angelina!” Lee shouted, and as Harry swerved, his insides boiling at what he had just heard, he knew Lee was trying to drown out the sound of the singing. “Come on now, Angelina — looks like she’s got just the Keeper to beat! — SHE SHOTS — SHE — aaaah . . .”

Bletchley, the Slytherin Keeper, had saved the goal; he threw the Quaffle to Warrington who sped off with it, zigzagging in between Alicia and Katie; the singing from below grew louder and louder as he drew nearer and nearer Ron —

*Weasley is our King,
Weasley is our King,
He always lets the Quaffle in,
Weasley is our King.*

Harry could not help himself: Abandoning his search for the Snitch, he turned his Firebolt toward Ron, a lone figure at the far end

of the pitch, hovering before the three goal hoops while the massive Warrington pelted toward him . . .

“— and it’s Warrington with the Quaffle, Warrington heading for goal, he’s out of Bludger range with just the Keeper ahead —”

A great swell of song rose from the Slytherin stands below:

*Weasley cannot save a thing,
He cannot block a single ring . . .*

“— so it’s the first test for new Gryffindor Keeper, Weasley, brother of Beaters, Fred and George, and a promising new talent on the team — come on, Ron!”

But the scream of delight came from the Slytherin end: Ron had dived wildly, his arms wide, and the Quaffle had soared between them, straight through Ron’s central hoop.

“Slytherin score!” came Lee’s voice amid the cheering and booing from the crowds below. “So that’s ten-nil to Slytherin — bad luck, Ron . . .”

The Slytherins sang even louder:

*WEASLEY WAS BORN IN A BIN,
HE ALWAYS LETS THE QUAFFLE IN . . .*

“— and Gryffindor back in possession and it’s Katie Bell tanking up the pitch —” cried Lee valiantly, though the singing was now so deafening that he could hardly make himself heard above it.

*WEASLEY WILL MAKE SURE WE WIN,
WEASLEY IS OUR KING . . .*

“Harry, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” screamed Angelina, soaring past him to keep up with Katie. “GET GOING!”

Harry realized that he had been stationary in midair for more than a minute, watching the progress of the match without sparing a thought for the whereabouts of the Snitch; horrified, he went into a dive and started circling the pitch again, staring around, trying to ignore the chorus now thundering through the stadium:

*WEASLEY IS OUR KING,
WEASLEY IS OUR KING . . .*

There was no sign of the Snitch anywhere he looked; Malfoy was still circling the stadium just like Harry. They passed midway around the pitch going in opposite directions and Harry heard Malfoy singing loudly,

WEASLEY WAS BORN IN A BIN . . .

“— and it’s Warrington again,” bellowed Lee, “who passes to Pucey, Pucey’s off past Spinnet, come on now Angelina, you can take him — turns out you can’t — but nice Bludger from Fred Weasley, I mean, George Weasley, oh who cares, one of them anyway, and Warrington drops the Quaffle and Katie Bell — er — drops it too — so that’s Montague with the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Montague takes the Quaffle, and he’s off up the pitch, come on now Gryffindor,

block him!"

Harry zoomed around the end of the stadium behind the Slytherin goal hoops, willing himself not to look at what was going on at Ron's end; as he sped past the Slytherin Keeper, he heard Bletchley singing along with the crowd below,

WEASLEY CANNOT SAVE A THING . . .

"— and Pucey's dodged Alicia again, and he's heading straight for goal, stop it, Ron!"

Harry did not have to look to see what had happened. There was a terrible groan from the Gryffindor end, coupled with fresh screams and applause from the Slytherins. Looking down, Harry saw the pug-faced Pansy Parkinson right at the front of the stands, her back to the pitch as she conducted the Slytherin supporters who were roaring.

*THAT'S WHY SLYTHERINS ALL SING:
WEASLEY IS OUR KING.*

But twenty-nil was nothing, there was still time for Gryffindor to catch up or catch the Snitch, a few goals and they would be in the lead as usual, Harry assured himself, bobbing and weaving through the other players in pursuit of something shiny that turned out to be Montague's watch strap. . . .

But Ron let in two more goals. There was an edge of panic in Harry's desire to find the Snitch now. If he could just get it soon and finish the game quickly . . .

“— and Katie Bell of Gryffindor dodges Pucey, ducks Montague, nice swerve, Katie, and she throws to Johnson, Angelina Johnson takes the Quaffle, she’s past Warrington, she’s heading for goal, come on now Angelina — GRYFFINDOR SCORE! It’s forty=ten, forty=ten to Slytherin and Pucey has the Quaffle . . .”

Harry could hear Luna’s ludicrous lion hat roaring amidst the Gryffindor cheers and felt heartened; only thirty points in it, that was nothing, they could pull back easily. Harry ducked a Bludger that Crabbe had sent rocketing in his direction and resumed his frantic scouring of the pitch for the Snitch, keeping one eye on Malfoy in case he showed signs of having spotted it, but Malfoy, like him, was continuing to soar around the stadium, searching fruitlessly . . .

“— Pucey throws to Warrington, Warrington to Montague, Montague back to Pucey — Johnson intervenes, Johnson takes the Quaffle, Johnson to Bell, this looks good — I mean bad — Bell’s hit by a Bludger from Goyle of Slytherin and it’s Pucey in possession again . . .”

*WEASLEY WAS BORN IN A BIN,
HE ALWAYS LETS THE QUAFFLE IN,
WEASLEY WILL MAKE SURE WE WIN —*

But Harry had seen it at last: The tiny fluttering Golden Snitch was hovering feet from the ground at the Slytherin end of the pitch.

He dived . . .

In a matter of seconds, Malfoy was streaking out of the sky on Harry’s left, a green-and-silver blur lying flat on his broom . . .

The Snitch skirted the foot of one of the goal hoops and scooted off toward the other side of the stands; its change of direction suited Malfoy, who was nearer. Harry pulled his Firebolt around, he and Malfoy were now neck and neck . . .

Feet from the ground, Harry lifted his right hand from his broom, stretching toward the Snitch . . . to his right, Malfoy's arm extended too, reaching, groping . . .

It was over in two breathless, desperate, windswept seconds — Harry's fingers closed around the tiny, struggling ball — Malfoy's fingernails scrabbled the back of Harry's hand hopelessly — Harry pulled his broom upward, holding the struggling ball in his hand and the Gryffindor spectators screamed their approval. . . .

They were saved, it did not matter that Ron had let in those goals, nobody would remember as long as Gryffindor had won —

WHAM!

A Bludger hit Harry squarely in the small of the back and he flew forward off his broom; luckily he was only five or six feet above the ground, having dived so low to catch the Snitch, but he was winded all the same as he landed flat on his back on the frozen pitch. He heard Madam Hooch's shrill whistle, an uproar in the stands compounded of catcalls, angry yells and jeering, a thud, then Angelina's frantic voice.

"Are you all right?"

"'Course I am," said Harry grimly, taking her hand and allowing her to pull him to his feet. Madam Hooch was zooming toward one of the Slytherin players above him, though he could not see who it was at this angle.

“It was that thug, Crabbe,” said Angelina angrily. “He whacked the Bludger at you the moment he saw you’d got the Snitch — but we won, Harry, we won!”

Harry heard a snort from behind him and turned around, still holding the Snitch tightly in his hand. Draco Malfoy had landed close by; white-faced with fury, he was still managing to sneer.

“Saved Weasley’s neck, haven’t you?” he said to Harry. “I’ve never seen a worse Keeper . . . but then he was *born in a bin*. . . . Did you like my lyrics, Potter?”

Harry did not answer; he turned away to meet the rest of the team who were now landing one by one, yelling and punching the air in triumph, all except Ron, who had dismounted from his broom over by the goalposts and was making his way slowly back to the changing rooms alone.

“We wanted to write another couple of verses!” Malfoy called, as Katie and Alicia hugged Harry. “But we couldn’t find rhymes for fat and ugly — we wanted to sing about his mother, see —”

“Talk about sour grapes,” said Angelina, casting Malfoy a disgusted look.

“— we couldn’t fit in *useless loser* either — for his father, you know —”

Fred and George had realized what Malfoy was talking about. Halfway through shaking Harry’s hand they stiffened, looking around at Malfoy.

“Leave it,” said Angelina at once, taking Fred by the arm. “Leave it, Fred, let him yell, he’s just sore he lost, the jumped-up little —”

“— but you like the Weasleys, don’t you, Potter?” said Malfoy,

sneering. “Spend holidays there and everything, don’t you? Can’t see how you stand the stink, but I suppose when you’ve been dragged up by Muggles even the Weasleys’ hovel smells okay —”

Harry grabbed hold of George; meanwhile it was taking the combined efforts of Angelina, Alicia, and Katie to stop Fred leaping on Malfoy, who was laughing openly. Harry looked around for Madam Hooch, but she was still berating Crabbe for his illegal Bludger attack.

“Or perhaps,” said Malfoy, leering as he backed away, “you can remember what *your* mother’s house stank like, Potter, and Weasley’s pigsty reminds you of it —”

Harry was not aware of releasing George, all he knew was that a second later both of them were sprinting at Malfoy. He had completely forgotten the fact that all the teachers were watching. All he wanted to do was cause Malfoy as much pain as possible. With no time to draw out his wand, he merely drew back the fist clutching the Snitch and sank it as hard as he could into Malfoy’s stomach —

“Harry! HARRY! GEORGE! *NO!*”

He could hear girls’ voices screaming, Malfoy yelling, George swearing, a whistle blowing, and the bellowing of the crowd around him, but he did not care, not until somebody in the vicinity yelled “*IMPEDIMENTA!*” and only when he was knocked over backward by the force of the spell did he abandon the attempt to punch every inch of Malfoy he could reach. . . .

“What do you think you’re doing?” screamed Madam Hooch, as Harry leapt to his feet again; it was she who had hit him with the Impediment Jinx. She was holding her whistle in one hand and a

wand in the other, her broom lay abandoned several feet away. Malfoy was curled up on the ground, whimpering and moaning, his nose bloody; George was sporting a swollen lip; Fred was still being forcibly restrained by the three Chasers, and Crabbe was cackling in the background. "I've never seen behavior like it — back up to the castle, both of you, and straight to your Head of House's office! Go! *Now!*"

Harry and George marched off the pitch, both panting, neither saying a word to each other. The howling and jeering of the crowd grew fainter and fainter until they reached the entrance hall, where they could hear nothing except the sound of their own footsteps. Harry became aware that something was still struggling in his right hand, the knuckles of which he had bruised against Malfoy's jaw; looking down he saw the Snitch's silver wings protruding from between his fingers, struggling for release.

They had barely reached the door of Professor McGonagall's office when she came marching along the corridor behind them. She was wearing a Gryffindor scarf, but tore it from her throat with shaking hands as she strode toward them, looking livid.

"In!" she said furiously, pointing to the door. Harry and George entered. She strode around behind her desk and faced them, quivering with rage as she threw the Gryffindor scarf aside onto the floor.

"*Well?*" she said. "I have never seen such a disgraceful exhibition. Two onto one! Explain yourselves!"

"Malfoy provoked us," said Harry stiffly.

"Provoked you?" shouted Professor McGonagall, slamming a fist onto her desk so that her tartan biscuit tin slid sideways off it and

burst open, littering the floor with Ginger Newts. "He'd just lost, hadn't he, of course he wanted to provoke you! But what on earth he can have said that justified what you two —"

"He insulted my parents," snarled George. "And Harry's mother."

"But instead of leaving it to Madam Hooch to sort out, you two decided to give an exhibition of Muggle dueling, did you?" bellowed Professor McGonagall. "Have you any idea what you've —?"

"Hem, hem."

George and Harry both spun around. Dolores Umbridge was standing in the doorway wrapped in a green tweed cloak that greatly enhanced her resemblance to a giant toad, and smiling in the horribly sickly, ominous way that Harry had come to associate with imminent misery.

"May I help, Professor McGonagall?" asked Professor Umbridge in her most poisonously sweet voice.

Blood rushed into Professor McGonagall's face.

"Help?" she repeated in a constricted voice. "What do you mean, 'help'?"

Professor Umbridge moved forward into the office, still smiling her sickly smile.

"Why, I thought you might be grateful for a little extra authority."

Harry would not have been surprised to see sparks fly from Professor McGonagall's nostrils.

"You thought wrong," she said, turning her back on Umbridge.

"Now, you two had better listen closely. I do not care what provocation Malfoy offered you, I do not care if he insulted every family member you possess, your behavior was disgusting and I am

giving each of you a week's worth of detention! Do not look at me like that, Potter, you deserve it! And if either of you ever —”

“*Hem, hem.*”

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes as though praying for patience as she turned her face toward Professor Umbridge again.

“*Yes?*”

“I think they deserve rather more than detentions,” said Umbridge, smiling still more broadly.

Professor McGonagall's eyes flew open. “But unfortunately,” she said, with an attempt at a reciprocal smile that made her look as though she had lockjaw, “it is what I think that counts, as they are in my House, Dolores.”

“Well, *actually*, Minerva,” simpered Umbridge, “I think you'll find that what I think *does* count. Now, where is it? Cornelius just sent it. . . . I mean,” she gave a little false laugh as she rummaged in her handbag, “the *Minister* just sent it. . . . Ah yes . . .”

She had pulled out a piece of parchment that she now unfurled, clearing her throat fussily before starting to read what it said.

“*Hem, hem* . . . Educational Decree Number Twenty-five . . .”

“Not another one!” exclaimed Professor McGonagall violently.

“Well, yes,” said Umbridge, still smiling. “As a matter of fact, Minerva, it was you who made me see that we *needed* a further amendment. . . . You remember how you overrode me, when I was unwilling to allow the Gryffindor Quidditch team to re-form? How you took the case to Dumbledore, who insisted that the team be allowed to play? Well, now, I couldn't have that. I contacted the Minister at once, and he quite agreed with me that the High Inquisitor

has to have the power to strip pupils of privileges, or she — that is to say, I — would have less authority than common teachers! And you see now, don't you, Minerva, how right I was in attempting to stop the Gryffindor team re-forming? *Dreadful* tempers . . . Anyway, I was reading out our amendment . . . *hem, hem* . . . 'The High Inquisitor will henceforth have supreme authority over all punishments, sanctions, and removal of privileges pertaining to the students of Hogwarts, and the power to alter such punishments, sanctions, and removals of privileges as may have been ordered by other staff members. Signed, Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, Order of Merlin First Class, etc., etc . . . ''

She rolled up the parchment and put it back into her handbag, still smiling.

"So . . . I really think I will have to ban these two from playing Quidditch ever again," she said, looking from Harry to George and back again.

Harry felt the Snitch fluttering madly in his hand.

"Ban us?" he said, and his voice sounded strangely distant. "From playing . . . ever again?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter, I think a lifelong ban ought to do the trick," said Umbridge, her smile widening still further as she watched him struggle to comprehend what she had said. "You *and* Mr. Weasley here. And I think, to be safe, this young man's twin ought to be stopped too — if his teammates had not restrained him, I feel sure he would have attacked young Mr. Malfoy as well. I will want their broomsticks confiscated, of course; I shall keep them safely in my office, to make sure there is no infringement of my ban. But I am not

unreasonable, Professor McGonagall,” she continued, turning back to Professor McGonagall who was now standing as still as though carved from ice, staring at her. “The rest of the team can continue playing, I saw no signs of violence from any of *them*. Well . . . good afternoon to you.”

And with a look of the utmost satisfaction Umbridge left the room, leaving a horrified silence in her wake.

“Banned,” said Angelina in a hollow voice, late that evening in the common room. “*Banned*. No Seeker and no Beaters . . . What on earth are we going to do?”

It did not feel as though they had won the match at all. Everywhere Harry looked there were disconsolate and angry faces; the team themselves were slumped around the fire, all apart from Ron, who had not been seen since the end of the match.

“It’s just so unfair,” said Alicia numbly. “I mean, what about Crabbe and that Bludger he hit after the whistle had been blown? Has she banned *him*?”

“No,” said Ginny miserably; she and Hermione were sitting on either side of Harry. “He just got lines, I heard Montague laughing about it at dinner.”

“And banning Fred when he didn’t even do anything!” said Alicia furiously, pummeling her knee with her fist.

“It’s not my fault I didn’t,” said Fred, with a very ugly look on his face. “I would’ve pounded the little scumbag to a pulp if you three hadn’t been holding me back.”

Harry stared miserably at the dark window. Snow was falling. The

Snitch he had caught earlier was now zooming around and around the common room; people were watching its progress as though hypnotized and Crookshanks was leaping from chair to chair, trying to catch it.

"I'm going to bed," said Angelina, getting slowly to her feet. "Maybe this will all turn out to have been a bad dream. . . . Maybe I'll wake up tomorrow and find we haven't played yet. . . ."

She was soon followed by Alicia and Katie. Fred and George sloped off to bed some time later, glowering at everyone they passed, and Ginny went not long after that. Only Harry and Hermione were left beside the fire.

"Have you seen Ron?" Hermione asked in a low voice.

Harry shook his head.

"I think he's avoiding us," said Hermione. "Where do you think he —?"

But at that precise moment, there was a creaking sound behind them as the Fat Lady swung forward and Ron came clambering through the portrait hole. He was very pale indeed and there was snow in his hair. When he saw Harry and Hermione he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Where have you been?" said Hermione anxiously, springing up.

"Walking," Ron mumbled. He was still wearing his Quidditch things.

"You look frozen," said Hermione. "Come and sit down!"

Ron walked to the fireside and sank into the chair farthest from Harry's, not looking at him. The stolen Snitch zoomed over their heads.

"I'm sorry," Ron mumbled, looking at his feet.

"What for?" said Harry.

"For thinking I can play Quidditch," said Ron. "I'm going to resign first thing tomorrow."

"If you resign," said Harry testily, "there'll only be three players left on the team." And when Ron looked puzzled, he said, "I've been given a lifetime ban. So've Fred and George."

"What?" Ron yelped.

Hermione told him the full story; Harry could not bear to tell it again. When she had finished, Ron looked more anguished than ever.

"This is all my fault —"

"You didn't *make* me punch Malfoy," said Harry angrily.

"— if I wasn't so lousy at Quidditch —"

"— it's got nothing to do with that —"

"— it was that song that wound me up —"

"— it would've wound anyone up —"

Hermione got up and walked to the window, away from the argument, watching the snow swirling down against the pane.

"Look, drop it, will you!" Harry burst out. "It's bad enough without you blaming yourself for everything!"

Ron said nothing but sat gazing miserably at the damp hem of his robes. After a while he said in a dull voice, "This is the worst I've ever felt in my life."

"Join the club," said Harry bitterly.

"Well," said Hermione, her voice trembling slightly. "I can think of one thing that might cheer you both up."

“Oh yeah?” said Harry skeptically.

“Yeah,” said Hermione, turning away from the pitch-black, snow-flecked window, a broad smile spreading across her face. “Hagrid’s back.”

Die leeu en die slang

Die volgende twee weke voel dit vir Harry asof hy 'n soort gelukbringer binne-in hom saamdra, 'n gloeiende geheim wat hom deur Umbridge se klasse dra en dit selfs vir hom moontlik maak om stroef te glimlag as hy in haar uitpeuloë kyk. Hy en die DS is besig om haar onder haar neus te ondergrawe. Hulle doen presies waarvoor sy en die Ministerie die meeste bang is. Wanneer hy veronderstel is om Wilbert Sluiphard se boek in haar klas te lees, dink hy eerder aan hul jongste byeenkoms. Hy onthou hoe Neville vir Hermien ontwapen het, hoe Colin Creevey die Hindernisvloek na net drie byeenkomste onder die knie gekry het en hoe Parvati Patel so 'n goeie Verkleinvloek uitgespreek het dat sy die tafel waarop al die kulklikkers staan in stof verander het.

Dis amper onmoontlik om 'n gereelde aand vir die DS-byeenkomste te reël. Hulle moet drie verskillende spanne se Kwiddiek-oefeninge in ag neem, wat dikwels verander weens swak weer, maar dit pla Harry nie. Hy het 'n gevoel dat dit waarskynlik beter is om die byeenkomste op ongereelde tye te hou. As iemand hulle dop hou, sal dit moeilik wees om 'n patroon te kry.

Hermien het 'n vernuftige metode uitgedink om die tyd en datum van die volgende byeenkoms aan al die lede oor te dra ingeval die tyd onverwags moet verander, aangesien dit verdag sal lyk as lede van die drie huise te dikwels oor en weer in die Groot Saal met mekaar gaan praat. Sy het vir elke lid van die DS 'n vals Galjoen geskep (Ron was baie opgewonde toe hy die mandjie vol munte die eerste keer sien, so oortuig was hy dis regte goud).

Aan die einde van hul vierde byeenkoms het Hermien die munte uitgehaal en een in die lug opgehou. "Sien julle die syfers om die munt se rand?" Die muntstuk glim rond en geel in die lig van die flitse. "Op regte Galjoene is dit die gnoom wat dit gemaak het se reeksnommer. Op hierdie vals munte is die syfers die tyd en dag van ons volgende byeenkoms. Die munt sal warm word wanneer die datum verander, so as julle dit in jul sakke hou, sal julle dit voel.

Ons gaan elkeen een neem en sodra Harry die datum van die volgende byeenkoms vasgestel het, sal hy dit op sy munt verander. Ek het 'n Veranderspreuk op al die munte gesit en hulle sal sy munt naboots."

'n Ongelowige stilte begroet Hermien se woorde. Sy kyk effens ontsteld na die gesigte om haar.

"Wel – ek het gedink dis 'n goeie idee," sê sy onseker. "Ek bedoel, selfs al sou Umbridge sê ons moet ons sakke leegmaak, kan sy nie met 'n Galjoen fout vind nie. Maar as julle voel julle wil liever iets anders –"

"Jy kan 'n Veranderspreuk doen?" vra Terry Boot.

"Ja," sê Hermien.

"Maar dis . . . dis OTTe-standaard," sê hy floutjies.

"O," sê Hermien en sy probeer beskeie lyk. "Wel . . . ja, wel; dit is."

"Hoekom is jy nie in Raweklou nie – met jou verstand?" vra hy en kyk verwonderd na Hermien.

"Die Sorteelhoed wou my eers in Raweklou sit, maar het toe op Griffindor besluit. Goed, beteken dit ons gaan die munte gebruik?"

Almal knik instemmend en neem 'n munt uit die mandjie. Harry kyk sydelings na Hermien.

"Weet jy waaraan laat dit my dink?"

"Nee, wat?"

"Die Doodseters se littekens. As Woldemort aan een van hulle raak, brand almal s'n en dan weet hulle hulle moet na hom toe gaan."

"Hm . . . ja," sê Hermien sag, "dis wat my die idee gegee het. Maar jy sal oplet dat ek besluit het om die datum op stukkies metaal en nie op mense se velle uit te sny nie."

"Hm . . . ek verkies jou metode," grinnik Harry. "Die enigste gevaar is dat ons dit per ongeluk kan uitgee."

"Wat's die kans?" sê Ron en kyk effens droewig na sy vals Galjoen. "Ek het nie regte Galjoene om dit mee te verwar nie."

Soos die eerste Kwiddiekwedstryd van die seisoen nader kom, Griffindor teen Slibberin, word die DS-byeenkomste opgeskort omdat Angelina daarop aandring dat hulle elke dag oefen. Die feit dat Griffindor nog maar onlangs die Kwiddiekbeker verower het, veroorsaak dat almal ekstra belang stel en ekstra opgewonde is. Raweklou en Hoesenproes is ook baie geïnteresseerd in die uitslag, omdat hulle ook in die loop van die jaar teen die twee spanne moet speel. En hoewel die hoofde van die wedywerende huise dit onder 'n mantel van goeie sportmanskap probeer wegsteek, is elkeen vasberade dat sy of haar huis moet wen. Harry besef opnuut hoe belangrik dit

vir professor McGonagall is om vir Slibberin te klop toe sy in die werk voor die wedstryd nie vir hulle huiswerk gee nie.

"Ek dink julle het op die oomblik heeltemal genoeg om te doen," sê sy stroef. Niemand kan hul ore glo nie, tot sy reguit na Harry en Ron kyk en kortaf sê: "Ek het gewoon geraak aan die Kwiddiekbeker in my kantoor, seuns, en ek wil dit regtig nie vir professor Snerp gee nie, gebruik dus die tyd om te oefen."

Snerp is nie minder partydig nie. Hy het die Kwiddiekveld so vol bespreek vir Slibberin-oefeninge dat die Griffindors sukkel om oesentye te kry. Hy steur hom ook nie aan klagtes van Griffindors wat sê dat die Slibberins hulle in die gange probeer toor nie. Toe Alicia Spinnet siekeboeg toe moet gaan met wenkbroue wat so dig en vinnig groei dat sy skaars kan sien, hou Snerp vol dat sy 'n Haarverdikkingspreuk op haarself toegepas het. Hy weier om na die veertien ooggetuies te luister wat sê dat Slibberin se Wagter, Miles Bletchley, haar van agter getoor het terwyl sy in die biblioteek gewerk het.

Harry is baie positief oor Griffindor se kanse, aangesien hulle nog nooit teen Malfoy se span verloor het nie. Toegegee, Ron is nog nie op Wood se peil nie, maar hy werk baie hard om te verbeter. Sy grootste swakheid is dat hy selfvertroue verloor sodra hy 'n fout gemaak het. Wanneer hy 'n doel afstaan, raak hy verbouereerd en maak dan nóg foute. Aan die ander kant het Harry Ron al opwindende dinge sien doen wanneer hy op dreef is. Tydens een merkwaardige oefening het hy met een hand aan sy besemstok gehang en die Swelger só hard van die doelpaal weggeskop dat dit dwarsoor die veld en deur die middelhoepel aan die oorkant geseil het. Die res van die span het gereken dit vergelyk gunstig met Barry Ryan, die Ierse Internasionale Wagter, se keerslag teen Pole se beste Jaer, Ladislaw Zamojski. Selfs Fred het gesê hy en George sal dalk nog trots kan wees op Ron en dat hulle dit ernstig oorweeg om te erken dat hy familie is – iets wat hulle die afgelope vier jaar al probeer ontken.

Harry se enigste bekommernis is in hoe 'n mate Ron hom deur die Slibberins se taktiek sal laat ontsenu, selfs nog voor hulle op die veld gaan. Harry verduur hulle uitjouery al vir vier jaar, dus in plaas van dat sy bloed verkil, lag hy vir snedige aanmerkings soos: "Hei, Pottie, ek hoor Warrington het gesweer hy sal jou Saterdag van jou besem afstamp!"

"Warrington mik so sleg, ek sal my eerder bekommer as hy na die een langs my mik," kap hy terug sodat Ron en Hermien giggel en die grynslag op Pansy Parkinson se gesig verdwyn.

Maar Ron moes nog nooit so 'n volgehoue aanslag van beledigings en intimidasie verduur nie. As die Slibberins, waarvan sommige sewendejaars is wat baie groter as hy is, in die verbystap in die gang prewel: "Is jou bed in die siekeboeg al bespreek, Weasley?" lag hy nie, maar hy word effens groen. As Draco Malfoy vir Ron naboots wat 'n Swelger laat val (en hy doen dit elke keer dat hulle mekaar sien), word Ron se ore vuurrooi en sy hande skud so erg dat hy skaars iets kan vashou.

Oktober gaan verby met huilende winde en reënvlae en November breek aan, so koud soos bevrore yster, die grond hard geryp in die oggende en met 'n ysige wind wat hulle oop hande en gesigte raps. Die lug en die plafon in die Groot Saal is 'n bleek përelgrys kleur, die berge om Hogwarts is vol sneeu en die temperatuur in die kasteel daal so laag dat baie studente dik draakvelhandskoene tussen klasse in die gange dra.

Die oggend van die wedstryd is dit helder en koud. Toe Harry wakker word en na Ron se bed kyk, sit Ron penregop met sy arms om sy knieë geslaan en staar in die verte.

"Is jy oukei?" vra Harry.

Ron knik, maar praat nie. Harry onthou die keer toe Ron per ongeluk 'n Slakvomeerspreuk oor homself uitgespreek het. Hy lyk net so bleek en sweterig soos toe en dis of hy nie sy mond wil oopmaak nie.

"Jy moet net iets eet," sê Harry opbeurend. "Kom."

Die Groot Saal is amper vol toe hulle daar kom. Die studente praat harder en meer opgewonde as gewoonlik. Toe Harry en Ron verby die Slibberin-tafel stap, raas hulle skielik harder. Harry kyk om en sien dat hulle, behalwe hul groen-en-silwer serpe en hoede, elkeen ook 'n silwer wapentjie in die vorm van 'n kroon aanhet. Om die een of ander rede waai hulle vir Ron en lag uitbundig. Harry probeer om in die verbystap te sien wat op die wapentjies staan, maar hy wil eerder vir Ron verby hulle tafel kry en talm dus nie lank genoeg om dit te lees nie.

Hulle word juigend by die Griffindor-tafel verwelkom, waar almal rooi en goud aanhet, maar dit lyk of die toejuiging Ron se moreel heeltemal verpletter. Hy val op die naaste bank neer en lyk of dit sy laaste maaltyd gaan wees.

"Ek moet mal wees om dit te doen," fluister hy skor. "Mal."

"Moenie simpel wees nie," sê Harry ferm en gee vir hom 'n bord pap aan. "Jy gaan oukei wees, dis normaal om senuagtig te wees."

"Ek's 'n mislukking," kryns Ron. "Ek is vrot. Ek kan nie speel om my lewe te red nie. Wat dink ek dóén ek?"

“Kom by,” sê Harry streng. “Dink aan daardie keerslag met jou voet nou die dag. Selfs Fred en George het gesê dit was briljant.”

Ron draai ’n verwese gesig na Harry.

“Dit was per ongeluk,” fluister hy mistroostig. “Ek het dit nie bedoel nie. Ek het van my besem afgeval toe niemand gekyk het nie en toe ek weer probeer opkom, toe skop ek die Swelger per ongeluk raak.”

“O,” sê Harry, wat vinnig moet herstel ná dié onaangename ont-hulling. “Wel, nog ’n paar sulke ongelukke en die wedstryd is ons s’n.”

Hermien en Ginny sit oorkant hulle met rooi en goue serpe, hand-koene en rosette.

“Hoe voel jy?” vra Ginny vir Ron, wat na die oorskietmelk onderin sy papbak staar en lyk of hy dit ernstig oorweeg om hom daarin te verdrink.

“Hy’s net senuagtig,” sê Harry.

“Wel, dis ’n goeie teken, ek voel ’n mens doen nooit goed in die eksamen as jy nie ’n bietjie gespanne is nie,” sê Hermien hartlik.

“Hallo,” sê ’n vae dromerige stem agter hulle. Harry kyk om. Mania Goedlief kom van die Rawekloutafel af aangesweef. ’n Spulmense kyk na haar en sommige lag openlik en wys na haar. Sy het lewenswylers ’n hoed in die vorm van ’n leeu se kop in die hande gekry en dit sit skeef op haar kop.

“Ek ondersteun natuurlik vir Griffindor,” sê Mania en wys na haar hoed. “Kyk wat doen dit . . .”

Sy tik daarteen met haar towerstaf. Die mond gaan oop en brul so realisties dat almal in die nabyheid wip van die skrik.

“Dis goed, nê?” sê Mania in haar noppies. “Ek wou dit nog aan ’n slang laat kou het . . . julle weet, vir Slibberin, maar daar was nie tyd nie. In elk geval, sterkte, Ronald!”

Sy sweef weg. Hulle is nog nie behoorlik oor die skok van die hoed nie, toe Angelina nader storm, vergesel van Katie en Alicia, wie se wenkbroue Madame Pomfrey gelukkig kon regtoor.

“Sodra julle gereed is,” sê Angelina, “gaan ons onmiddellik veld toe om te kyk hoe die weersomstandighede is en om aan te trek.”

“Ons is nou-nou daar,” verseker Harry haar. “Ron moet net gou iets eet.”

Dis binne tien minute duidelik dat Ron niks meer kan eet nie en Harry voel dis beter om hom by die kleedkamers te kry. Toe hulle van die tafel af opstaan, staan Hermien ook op, neem Harry se arm en trek hom eenkant toe.

“Moenie dat Ron sien wat op daardie Slibberin-wapens staan nie,” fluister sy dringend.

Harry kyk vraend na haar, maar sy skud haar kop om hom te waarsku; Ron kom aangedrentel; hy lyk alleen en verlore.

“Sterkte, Ron,” sê Hermien. Sy staan op haar tone en plant ’n soen op sy wang. “En jy ook, Harry.”

Dit lyk of Ron effens bykom. Toe hulle deur die Groot Saal stap, raak hy verdwaas aan die plek op sy wang waar Hermien hom gesoen het, asof hy nie kan glo wat so pas gebeur het nie. Hy is te afgetrokke om te sien wat om hom aangaan, maar Harry loer in die verbystap nuuskierig na die Slibberins se kroonvormige wapens. Hierdie keer kan hy die woorde lees.

Weasley is ons Koning

Harry weet dadelik dat dit niks goeds voorspel nie. Hy jaag Ron deur die ingangsportaal, af met die trappe en uit in die ysige lug.

Die gras is hard geryp en kraak onder hulle voete toe hulle afdraand oor die grasperk na die stadion draf. Daar is geen wind nie en die lug is përelwit, wat beteken die sig sal goed wees sonder die direkte sonlig in hul oë. Harry wys Ron daarop, maar dit lyk nie of Ron inneem wat hy sê nie.

Angelina het reeds aangetrek en is besig om met die res van die span te praat toe hulle instap. Harry en Ron trek hul klede aan – Ron probeer ’n paar minute lank om syne agterstevoor aan te trek tot Alicia hom jammer kry en hom reghelp. Toe gaan sit hulle en luister na die spanpraatjie terwyl die gebrabbel van stemme aan die buitekant geleidelik harder word soos die mense van die kasteel af na die stadion stroom.

“Goed, ek het pas eers gehoor hoe Slibberin se finale span lyk,” sê Angelina en kyk na ’n stuk perkament in haar hand. “Verlede jaar se Brekers, Derrick en Bole, is weg, maar dit lyk of Montague hulle deur die gewone gorillas vervang het eerder as mense wat ordentlik kan vlieg. Hulle is twee kêrels by name Krabbe en Goliat, ek weet nie juis iets van hulle af nie –”

“Ons ken hulle,” sê Harry en Ron gelyk.

“Wel, hulle lyk nie slim genoeg om te weet watter kant van die besem voor is nie,” sê Angelina en steek die perkament in haar sak, “maar dit het my nog altyd verbaas dat Derrick en Bole sonder padtekens by die veld kon kom.”

“Krabbe en Goliat is dieselfde tipe,” verseker Harry haar.

Hulle hoor hoe honderde voete met die steil banke van die pawiljoen opklim. Party mense sing, maar Harry kan nie die woorde uitmaak nie. Hy begin senuagtig raak, hoewel hy weet dat sy senu-

wees niks in vergelyking met Ron s'n is nie. Ron hou sy maag vas en staar voor hom uit, sy kake is opmekaar geklem en sy vel is bleekgrys.

Angelina kyk na haar horlosie. "Dis tyd om te gaan," sê sy in 'n gedempte stem. "Komaan, julle . . . en sterkte."

Die span staan op, swaai hul besems oor hul skouers en marsjeer in enkelgelid' uit die kleedkamer tot in die helder son. Die skare se jubel begroet hulle en Harry hoor mense steeds sing, maar dit word verdrink deur krete en fluite.

Die Slibberin-span wag hulle in. Hulle dra ook die silwer kroonvormige wapens. Die nuwe kaptein, Montague, is baie soos Dudley Dursley gebou, met massiewe voorarms soos harige dye. Krabbe en Goliath, amper so groot, staan agter hom en swaai hul nuwe Brekerknuppels terwyl hulle hul oë onnoselrig teen die son knip. Malfoy staan eenkant, die sonlig blink op sy witblonde hare. Hy vang Harry se oog en tik die wapen teen sy bors met 'n grinnik.

"Kapteins, skud hande," beveel Madame Hooch, en Angelina en Montague steek hul hande uit. Harry sien dat Montague probeer om Angelina se vingers te vergruis, maar sy verroer nie 'n spier nie. "Op julle besems . . ."

Madame Hooch sit haar fluitjie in haar mond en blaas.

Die balle word vrygelaat en die veertien spelers skiet boontoe. Harry sien uit die hoek van sy oog hoe Ron doelpale toe laat vat. Harry zoem hoër, ontwyk 'n Moker en maak 'n wye draai om die veld terwyl hy op die uitkyk bly vir 'n goue glinstering. Aan die oorkant van die veld doen Draco Malfoy dieselfde.

"En dis Johnson – Johnson met die Swelger, 'n baie oulike speler daar – ek sê dit al jare, maar sy wil nog steeds nie met my uitgaan nie –"

"JORDAAN!" skree professor McGonagall.

"– net 'n grappie, professor, kikker dinge 'n bietjie op – en sy ontwyk Warrington, sy's verby Montague, sy's – eina – van agter getref deur 'n Moker van Krabbe . . . Montague vang die Swelger, Montague gaan terug oor die veld en – goeie Moker daar van George Weasley, dis 'n Moker teen die kop vir Montague, hy laat val die Swelger, gevang deur Katie Bell, Katie Bell van Griffindor – terugaangee na Alicia Spinnet en daar trek Spinnet –"

Lee Jordaan se kommentaar weerklink deur die stadion en Harry luister so goed soos hy kan deur die suisende wind in sy ore en die lawaai van die skare. Dis 'n geskree, gesing en gejou.

"– ontwyk Warrington, ontwyk 'n Moker – dit was amper, Alicia – en die skare raak rasend, luister na hulle, wat sing hulle daar?"

Toe Lee stil word om te luister, klink die lied daverend op uit die Slibberins se groen-en-silwer deel van die pawiljoen:

*"Weasley kan net kring en kring,
Hy hou geen Swelger uit die ring,
Dis hoekom Slibberin hard sing,
Weasley is ons koning,
Weasley is gebore,
Sonder kop of ore,
Hy help ons Swelger in die ring,
Weasley is ons koning."*

"– en Alicia gee terug na Angelina!" skreeu Lee. Harry, wat woedend wegswenk, weet Lee probeer die lied doodskree. "Komaan, Angelina – lyk of sy nog net verby die Wagter moet kom! – SY SKIET – SY – aaaaaa . . ."

Blethley, die Slibberins se Wagter, het die doel gekeer. Hy gooi die Swelger na Warrington, wat wegskiet en tussen Alicia en Katie deurvleg. Soos hy nader aan Ron kom, word die gesing op die pawiljoen harder en harder.

*"Weasley is ons Koning
Weasley is ons Koning
Hy laat die Swelger in die ring
Weasley is ons Koning."*

Harry kan dit nie help nie. Hy soek nie meer na die Snip nie. Hy swaai om en kyk na Ron, wat baie alleen lyk aan die oorkant van die veld voor die doelpale, veral met die tamaai groot Warrington wat op hom alpyl.

"– en dis Warrington met die Swelger, Warrington wat op die doelpale afstuur, hy's buite die Moker se bereik, met net die Wagter voor hom –"

'n Groot golf toejuiging styg uit die Slibberin-pawiljoen op.

*"Weasley kan net kring en kring,
Hy hou geen Swelger uit die ring . . ."*

"– dis 'n eerste toets vir Griffindor se nuwe Wagter, Weasley, broer van die Brekers Fred en George, en 'n belowende nuwe talent in die span – komaan, Ron!"

Maar die vreugdekreet kom van die Slibberins se kant. Ron duik

wild, sy arms wyd oop, en die Swelger seil verby en deur die middelste hoepel.

"Slibberin het 'n doel!" kom Lee se stem oor die gejuig en gejou van die skare, "dis tien-nul vir Slibberin – jammer, Ron."

Die Slibberins sing nog harder.

"WEASLEY IS GEBORE,
SONDER KOP OF ORE . . ."

"– en Griffindor is weer in besit en dis Katie Bell wat oor die veld keer –" skree Lee dapper, hoewel die gesing nou so oorverdowend is, dat hy skaars hoorbaar is.

"HY LAAT DIE SWELGER IN DIE RING
WEASLEY IS ONS KONING . . ."

"HARRY, WAT DOEN JY?" skree Angelina toe sy verby hom vlieg en vir Katie probeer inhaal. "WORD WAKKER!"

Harry besef met 'n skok dat hy al vir meer as 'n minuut in die lug hang en na die wedstryd kyk sonder om hom aan die Snip te steur. Hy duik en sirkel weer om die veld terwyl hy oral kyk en probeer om die koor stemme op die pawiljoen te ignoreer.

"WEASLEY IS ONS KONING
WEASLEY IS ONS KONING . . ."

Waar hy ook al kyk, daar is nie 'n teken van die Snip nie. Net soos hy sirkel Malfoy ook om die veld, maar in die teenoorgestelde rigting, en Harry hoor hoe hy luidkeels saamsing.

"WEASLEY IS GEBORE, SONDER KOP OF ORE . . ."

"– en dis weer Warrington," brul Lee, "wat aangee na Pucey, Pucey kom verby Spinnet, komaan, Angelina, jy kan dit doen – maar sy kan nie – mooi Moker van Fred Weasley, ek bedoel, George Weasley . . . ag, wat maak dit saak, een van die twee . . . en Warrington laat val die Swelger en Katie Bell – gits – sy laat dit ook val – dis Montague met die Swelger, Slibberin-kaptein Montague het die Swelger en hy sit af oor die veld, komaan Griffindor, keer hom!"

Harry skiet soos blits na die kant van die stadion agter die Slibberin-doelpale en dwing homself om nie te kyk wat aan Ron se

kant van die veld gebeur nie. Toe hy verby die Slibberins se Wagter vlieg, hoor hy hoe Bletchley saam met die skare sing:

"HY HOU GEEN SWELGER UIT DIE RING . . ."

"– en Pucey ontwyk weer vir Alicia en hy's op pad doelpale toe, keer hom, Ron!"

Harry hoef nie te kyk om te weet wat gebeur het nie. Die Griffindors se kant van die pawiljoen kreun tragies terwyl die Slibberins van voor af skree en hande klap. Harry kyk af en sien Pansy Parkinson heel voor op die pawiljoen. Sy staan met haar rug na die veld toe en dirigeer die Slibberins wat luidkeels brul:

*"HY LAAT DIE SWELGER IN DIE RING
WEASLEY IS ONS KONING . . ."*

Maar twintig-nul is niks . . . daar is nog hope tyd vir Griffindor om hulle in te haal of die Snip te vang . . . net 'n paar doele en hulle is weer voor soos altyd, troos Harry homself terwyl hy deur die spelers vleg agter iets blinks aan, wat toe al die tyd Montague se horlosiebandjie is.

Maar Ron staan nog twee doele af. Nou begin Harry paniekerig raak. As hy die Snip gou kan kry, sal die wedstryd gou verby wees.

"– en Katie Bell van Griffindor ontwyk vir Pucey, vir Montague, mooi swenkslag, Katie, en sy gee uit na Johnson, Angelina Johnson het die Swelger, sy's verby Warrington, sy's op pad doelpale toe, komaan, Angelina – GRIFFINDOR HET 'N DOEL! Dis veertig-tien, veertig-tien vir Slibberin en Pucey het die Swelger . . ."

Harry hoor hoe Mania se verspotte leeu bo-oor die Griffindors se krete brul en voel beter. Net dertig punte, dis regtig niks, hulle kan dit maklik inhaal. Harry ontwyk 'n Moker wat Krabbe na hom stuur en gaan voort om die Snip te soek, terwyl hy een oog op Malfoy hou ingeval dié tekens toon dat hy iets gesien het. Maar Malfoy vlieg ook hoog bo die veld en soek vrugteloos . . .

"– Pucey na Warrington, Warrington na Montague, Montague terug na Pucey – Johnson onderskep, Johnson het die Swelger, Johnson na Bell, dit lyk goed – ek bedoel sleg – Bell word getref deur 'n Moker van Goliath van Slibberin en dis Pucey in besit . . ."

*"WEASLEY IS GEBORE,
SONDER KOP OF ORE,
HY HELP ONS SWELGER IN DIE RING . . ."*

Maar Harry het dit uiteindelik gesien: die klein, fladderende Goue Snip wat 'n meter bo die grond aan die Slibberins se kant van die veld hang.

Hy duik . . .

Binne sekondes blits Malfoy uit die lug aan Harry se linkerkant, 'n groen-en-silwer streep wat plat op sy besem lê . . .

Die Snip draai om die voet van een van die hoepels en laat vat na die ander kant van die pawiljoen. Die verandering van rigting is in Malfoy se guns. Hy is nader daaraan. Harry pluk sy Vuurslag om. Hy en Malfoy is nek aan nek . . .

Hulle is enkele tree bo die grond toe Harry sy regterhand van die besem afhaal en strek na die Snip . . . aan sy regterkant is Malfoy se arm ook uitgestrek . . .

Dis verby binne twee uitasem, wanhopige, windverwaaide sekondes. Harry se vingers sluit om die spartelende balletjie – Malfoy se naels skraap magteloos oor die rugkant van Harry se hand – Harry pluk sy besem om en hou die fladderende balletjie omhoog. Die Griffindors juig van blydschap . . .

Hulle is veilig. Dit maak nie saak dat Ron daardie doele gemis het nie, niemand sal dit onthou nie, solank Griffindor net gewen het . . .

BOEM.

'n Moker tref Harry tussen die blaie en hy vlieg van sy besem af. Hy is gelukkig net 'n paar meter bo die grond omdat hy so laag moes duik om die Snip te vang, maar hy is nietemin winduit toe hy op sy rug op die bevrore grond val. Hy hoor Madame Hooch se skril fluitjie, 'n rumoer in die pawiljoen, uitjouery, woedende krete en 'n geskree, 'n slag en toe Angelina se benoude stem.

“Is jy oukei?”

“Natuurlik is ek,” sê Harry grimmig. Hy vat haar hand en sy trek hom op. Madame Hooch soem na een van die Slibberin-spelers bo hom, maar hy kan nie uit hierdie hoek sien wie dit is nie.

“Dis daardie lummel Krabbe,” sê Angelina kwaad. “Hy't die Moker na jou geslaan die oomblik toe hy sien jy het die Snip – maar ons het gewen, Harry, ons het gewen!”

Harry hoor iemand agter hom snork en hy kyk om, die Snip nog steeds styf in sy hand. Draco Malfoy het naby hulle geland. Sy gesig is snedig vertrek en wit van woede.

“Weasley se bas gered, nè?” snou hy. “Ek het nog nooit so 'n treurige Wagter gesien nie . . . maar hy is sonder ore gebore . . . hoe hou jy van my liedjies, Potter?”

Harry antwoord nie. Hy stap na die res van die span, wat nou die

een ná die ander land. Almal skree en steek triomfantlik vuiste in die lug, behalwe Ron, wat by die doelpale van sy besem klim en stadig en alleen kledkamer toe stap.

“Ons wou nog ’n paar versies skryf!” skree Malfoy toe Katie en Alicia vir Harry omhels. “Maar ons kon niks kry wat met vet en lelik rym nie – ons wou oor sy ma sing, sien –”

“Praat van suur druiwe,” sê Angelina en kyk minagtend na Malfoy.

“– ons kon ook nie iets kry wat met *slegte verloorder* rym nie – vir sy pa, weet jy –”

Fred en George hoor Malfoy se woorde. Hulle is nog besig om Harry se hand te skud, toe hulle skielik stokstyf word en na Malfoy omswaai.

“Los dit!” sê Angelina dadelik en vat Fred se arm. “Los dit, Fred, laat hom skree, hy’s net suur omdat hulle verloor het, die opgeblase klein –”

“– maar jy hou mos van die Weasleys, of hoe, Potter?” skree Malfoy smalend. “Jy gaan mos vakansies soontoe! Kan nie verstaan hoe jy die stank kan verduur nie, maar dis seker omdat jy by Moggels grootgeword het. Die Weasleys se nes ruik seker vir jou oukei –”

Harry gryp vir George, en Angelina, Alicia en Katie moet lelik bontstaan om te keer dat Fred vir Malfoy, wat nou openlik lag, bespring. Harry kyk rond op soek na Madame Hooch, maar sy is nog besig om vir Krabbe oor sy onwettige Moker-aanval af te ransel.

“Of dalk,” sê Malfoy smalend en tree effens agteruit, “onthou jy nog hoe jou ma se huis gestink het, Potter, dalk herinner Weasley-hulle se varkhok jou daaraan –”

Harry weet nie wanneer hy vir George laat los het nie. Al wat hy weet, is dat hulle al twee op Malfoy afstorm. Hy vergeet dat al die onderwysers hulle dophou; hy wil net vir Malfoy so seer moontlik maak. Daar is nie tyd om sy towerstaf uit te haal nie, dus trek hy sy vuus terug en plant dit met al sy krag in Malfoy se maag –

“Harry! HARRY! GEORGE! NEE!”

Hy hoor die meisies skree, Malfoy gil, George vloek, ’n fluitjie blaas en die mense om hulle bulder, maar dit traak hom nie. Eers toe iemand naby hom “*Impedimenta!*” skree en die geweld van die towerspreuk hom agteroor slinger, hou hy op om Malfoy te slaan.

“Wat gaan hier aan?” skree Madame Hooch toe Harry opspring. Dis sy wat hom met die Hindernisspreuk getref het. Sy het haar fluitjie in een hand en haar towerstaf in die ander, terwyl haar besem ’n paar tree weg lê. Malfoy lê opgekrul op die grond en kerm,

Hy was vol bloed, George se lip is opgeswel, Fred word nog steeds deur die drie Jaers vasgehou en Krabbe kekkellag op die agtergrond.

“Ek het nog nooit sulke gedrag gesien nie! Kasteel toe, albei van julle, reguit na julle huishoof se kantoor. *Dadelik!*” skree Madame Hooch skril.

Harry en George draai sonder ’n woord om en stap van die veld af. Die gejl en geskree van die skare raak al dowwer tot hulle by die ingangsportaal kom waar hulle net hulle eie voetstappe kan hoor. Harry kom agter dat daar iets in die hand is waarmee hy vir Malfoy geslaan het. Hy kyk af en sien die Snip se glinsterende vlerkies tussen sy vingers. Hy sien ook dat sy kneukels gekneus is waar hulle Malfoy se kakebeen getref het.

Hulle is skaars by professor McGonagall se kantoordeur toe sy in die gang agter hulle aangestap kom. Sy dra ’n Griffindor-serp, maar ruk dit met bewende hande van haar nek af. Sy lyk briesend kwaad.

“In!” sê sy kwaai en wys na die deur. Harry en George stap in. Sy stap om die lessenaar en gluur bewend van woede na hulle terwyl sy die Griffindor-serp eenkant op die vloer smyt.

“Wel?” sê sy. “Ek het nog nooit sulke onuitstaanbare gedrag gesien nie. Twee teen een! Praat!”

“Malfoy het ons getart,” sê Harry kil.

“Getart?” skree professor McGonagall en slaan met haar vuus op die tafel sodat die tartanblik afgly en oopgaan. Gemmerkoekies spat oor die vloer. “Hy het so pas verloor, dan nie? Natuurlik sal hy julle tart! Maar wat op aarde het hy gesê dat julle twee –”

“Hy’t my ouers beledig,” snou George. “En Harry se ma.”

“En pleks dat julle dit los sodat Madame Hooch hom kortvat, moet julle twee vir die wêreld wys hoe Moggels probleme uitwerk!” brul professor McGonagall. “Het julle ’n idee wat julle –?”

“Hem, hem.”

Harry en George vlieg om. Dolores Umbridge staan in die deur, toegewikkel in ’n groen tweedmantel wat haar nog meer na ’n enorme skurwepadda laat lyk. Sy glimlag op daardie walglike, sieklike, onheilspellende manier wat Harry met dreigende ellende assosieer.

“Kan ek help, professor McGonagall?” vra professor Umbridge in haar giftigste, soetste stem.

Professor McGonagall se gesig word rooi.

“Help?” herhaal sy in ’n wurgende stem. “Wat bedoel jy, *help?*”

Professor Umbridge kom die kantoor binne. Sy glimlag nog steeds op haar sieklike manier.

“Wel, ek het gedink jy het dalk ’n bietjie ekstra gesag nodig.”

Harry sou nie verbaas gewees het as vonke op hierdie oomblik uit professor McGonagall se neusgate gespat het nie.

“Jy het verkeerd gedink,” sê sy en draai haar rug op Umbridge. “Julle twee moet goed luister. Ek gee nie om hoe erg Malfoy julle getart het nie, ek gee nie om of hy elke lid van julle familie beledig het nie, julle gedrag was afstootlik. Julle sal elkeen ’n week lank detensie doen! Moenie so na my kyk nie, Potter, jy’t dit verdien! En as een van julle ooit weer –”

“Hem, hem.”

Professor McGonagall maak haar oë toe asof sy om geduld bid voor sy weer na professor Umbridge draai.

“Ja?”

“Ek dink hulle verdien meer as bloot detensie,” sê professor Umbridge en sy glimlag nog breër.

Professor McGonagall se oë vlieg oop.

“Ongelukkig,” sê sy en sy probeer só hard om ook te glimlag dat dit lyk of sy klem in die kaak het, “is dit wat ek dink wat tel, aangesien hulle in my huis is, Dolores.”

“Wel, eintlik, Minerva,” sê professor Umbridge stroperig, “dink ek jy sal gou besef dis wat ek dink wat eintlik tel. Nou waar is dit tog? Cornelius het dit so pas vir my gestuur. . . . ek bedoel,” sy gee ’n vals laggie terwyl sy in haar handsak krap, “die Minister het dit gestuur . . . a, hierso . . .”

Sy haal ’n stuk perkament uit, vou dit oop, skraap haar keel oordadig en lees wat daarop staan.

“Hem, hem . . . ‘Opvoedkundige Dekreet Nommer Vyf-en-Twintig’.”

“Nie nog een nie!” skree professor McGonagall verwoed.

“Inderdaad, ja,” sê Umbridge glimlaggend. “Om die waarheid te sê, Minerva, dit was jy wat my laat besef het dat ons verdere wysigings moet maak . . . Onthou jy hoe jy my teengestaan het toe ek die Griffindor-span toestemming geweier het om weer ’n span te vorm? Hoe jy die saak na Dompeldorius geneem het, wat daarop aangedring het dat die span speel? Wel, ek kon dit nie daar laat nie. Ek het die Minister dadelik gekontak en hy het met my saamgestem dat die Hoë Ondersoeker die reg moet hê om leerlinge voorregte te ontnem, anders sal sy – dis nou ek – minder gesag as die gewone onderwyser hê! En sien jy nou, Minerva, hoe reg ek was toe ek die Griffindor-span se aansoek teengestaan het? Veragtelike humeure! In elk geval, ek was besig om die wysiging te lees . . . hem, hem . . . Die Hoë Ondersoeker sal hiermee volle gesag hê betreffende strawwe, sanksies en weerhouding van voorregte rakende Hogwarts-studente

en die mag om strawwe, sanksies en weerhouding van voorregte soos beveel deur ander personeellede te wysig. Geteken, Cornelius Broddelwerk, Mininster vir Towerkuns, Orde van Merlin Eerste klas, ensovoorts.”

Sy rol die perkament op en steek dit terug in haar handsak. “Hm, ek dink regtig ons moet hierdie twee menere verbied om ooit weer Kwiddiek te speel.” Sy kyk glimlaggend van Harry na George en weer terug.

Harry voel hoe die Snip in sy hand fladder.

“Verbied?” sê hy en sy stem klink vreemd en ver. “Van ooit weer speel?”

“Ja, meneer Potter, ek dink ’n lewenslange verbod sal dalk help,” sê Umbridge en sy glimlag nog breër terwyl sy toekyk hoe haar woorde insink. “Jy en meneer Weasley. En ek dink om veilig te wees, moet sy tweeling ook gestuit word – as sy spanmaats hom nie verhinder het nie, is ek seker sou hy die jong meneer Malfoy ook aangerand het. Natuurlik moet hulle besems gekonfiskeer word. Ek sal hulle veilig in my kantoor hou net om seker te maak dat my verbod nie verbreek word nie. Maar ek is nie onredelik nie, professor McGonagall,” gaan sy voort en kyk na professor McGonagall, wat lyk asof sy uit ys gekerf is. “Die res van die span kan voortgaan om te speel. Ek het geen tekens van gewelddadigheid in hulle gesien nie. Wel, tot siens, almal.”

En met ’n uitdrukking van volslae tevredenheid, verlaat Umbridge die kamer waar ’n doodse stilte heers.

“Verbied,” sê Angelina in ’n hol stem later daardie aand in die geselskamer. “Verbied. Geen Soeker en geen Brekers nie. . . wat op aarde gaan ons doen?”

Dit voel glad nie asof hulle die wedstryd gewen het nie. Net waar Harry kyk, is vies of teleurgestelde gesigte. Die span lê voor die vuur, almal behalwe Ron, vir wie niemand nog ná die einde van die wedstryd gesien het nie.

“Dis net so onregverdig,” sê Alicia in ’n doodse stem. “Ek bedoel, wat van Krabbe en daardie Moker wat hy ná die fluitjie geslaan het? Het sy hom verban?”

“Nee,” sê Ginny wanhopig. Sy en Hermien sit aan weerskante van Harry. “Hy’t net uitskryfwerk gekry. Ek het gehoor hoe Montague etenstyd daaroor lag.”

“En om vir Fred te verban en hy’t nie eens iets gedoen nie!” sê Alicia en slaan ergerlik met haar vuus op haar knie.

“Dis nie my skuld nie,” sê Fred met ’n afskuwelike trek op sy

gesig. "Ek sou die klein etter verpletter het as julle my nie vasgehou het nie."

Harry staar mistroostig na die donker venster. Dit sneeu. Die Snip wat hy vroeër gevang het, zoem deur die geselskamer. Mense staar asof betower daarna en Kromskeen spring van stoel na stoel en probeer dit vang.

"Ek gaan slaap," sê Angelina en staan stadig op. "Dalk was dit net 'n slegte droom. . . dalk word ek môreoggend wakker en sien ons het nog nie gespeel nie. . ."

Alicia en Katie gaan kort hierna ook uit. Fred en George, wat in die verbystap na almal gluur, gaan 'n rukkie later bed toe en Ginny volg na lank daarna nie. Net Harry en Hermien sit nog by die vuur.

"Het jy vir Ron gesien?" vra Hermien sag.

Harry skud sy kop.

"Ek dink hy vermy ons," sê Hermien. "Waar dink jy is hy –?"

Op daardie presiese oomblik swaai die Vet Vrou agter hulle krandend oop en Ron klouter deur die portretopening. Hy is baie bleek en daar is sneeu in sy hare. Toe hy vir Harry en Hermien sien, gaan hy staan.

"Waar was jy?" vra Hermien angstig en spring op.

"Gestap," brom Ron. Hy het nog steeds sy Kwiddieklere aan.

"Jy is yskoud," sê Hermien. "Kom sit hier!"

Ron stap na die vuurherd en val in die stoel die verste van Harry s'n neer sonder om na hom te kyk. Die gesteelde Snip zoem oor hulle koppe.

"Ek is jammer," mompel Ron en staar na sy voete.

"Waaroor?" sê Harry.

"Omdat ek gedink het ek kan Kwiddiek speel. Ek gaan môre bedank."

"As jy bedank," sê Harry kortaf, "is daar net drie spanlede oor." Toe Ron verward lyk, verduidelik hy: "Ek is lewenslank geskors. En Fred en George ook."

"Wat?" gil Ron.

Hermien vertel vir hom die hele storie, want Harry sien nie kans om dit weer te moet doen nie. Toe sy stilbly, lyk Ron nog wanhopiger as tevore.

"Dis alles my skuld –"

"Jy't my nie gedwing om vir Malfoy te slaan nie," sê Harry kwaai.

"– as ek nie so vrot gespeel het nie –"

"– dit het niks daarmee uit te waai nie."

"– dis daardie gesing wat my van stryk gebring het –"

"– dit sou enigeen van stryk gebring het."

Hermien staan op en stap na die venster, weg van die argument. Sy kyk hoe die sneeu teen die ruit waai.

"Luister, los dit, oukei?" bars Harry uit. "Dis erg genoeg sonder dat jy jouself vir alles blameer!"

Ron sê niks, maar staar mistroostig na sy kleed se nat soom. Ná 'n rukkie sê hy in 'n bedrukte stem: "Dis die ergste wat ek nog ooit oor iets gevoel het."

"Ek ook," sê Harry bitter.

"Wel," sê Hermien en haar stem bewe effens. "Ek dink aan iets wat julle beter sal laat voel."

"O ja?" sê Harry skepties.

"Ja," sê Hermien en draai weg van die donker, sneeubevlekte venster met 'n breë glimlag op haar gesig. "Hagrid is terug."

CHAPTER TWENTY



HAGRID'S TALE

Harry sprinted up to the boys' dormitory to fetch the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map from his trunk; he was so quick that he and Ron were ready to leave at least five minutes before Hermione hurried back down from the girls' dormitories, wearing scarf, gloves, and one of her own knobbly elf hats.

"Well, it's cold out there!" she said defensively, as Ron clicked his tongue impatiently.

They crept through the portrait hole and covered themselves hastily in the Cloak — Ron had grown so much he now needed to crouch to prevent his feet showing — then, moving slowly and cautiously, they proceeded down the many staircases, pausing at

intervals to check the map for signs of Filch or Mrs. Norris. They were lucky; they saw nobody but Nearly Headless Nick, who was gliding along absentmindedly humming something that sounded horribly like "Weasley Is Our King." They crept across the entrance hall and then out into the silent, snowy grounds. With a great leap of his heart, Harry saw little golden squares of light ahead and smoke coiling up from Hagrid's chimney. He set off at a quick march, the other two jostling and bumping along behind him, and they crunched excitedly through the thickening snow until at last they reached the wooden front door; when Harry raised his fist and knocked three times, a dog started barking frantically inside.

"Hagrid, it's us!" Harry called through the keyhole.

"Shoulda known!" said a gruff voice.

They beamed at one another under the Cloak; they could tell that Hagrid's voice was pleased. "Bin home three seconds . . . Out the way, Fang . . . *Out the way*, yeh dozy dog . . ."

The bolt was drawn back, the door creaked open, and Hagrid's head appeared in the gap.

Hermione screamed.

"Merlin's beard, keep it down!" said Hagrid hastily, staring wildly over their heads. "Under that Cloak, are yeh? Well, get in, get in!"

"I'm sorry!" Hermione gasped, as the three of them squeezed past Hagrid into the house and pulled the Cloak off themselves so he could see them. "I just — oh, *Hagrid!*"

"It's nuthin', it's nuthin'!" said Hagrid hastily, shutting the door behind them and hurrying to close all the curtains, but Hermione continued to gaze up at him in horror.

Hagrid's hair was matted with congealed blood, and his left eye had been reduced to a puffy slit amid a mass of purple-and-black bruises. There were many cuts on his face and hands, some of them still bleeding, and he was moving gingerly, which made Harry suspect broken ribs. It was obvious that he had only just got home; a thick black traveling cloak lay over the back of a chair and a haversack large enough to carry several small children leaned against the wall inside the door. Hagrid himself, twice the size of a normal man and three times as broad, was now limping over to the fire and placing a copper kettle over it.

"What happened to you?" Harry demanded, while Fang danced around them all, trying to lick their faces.

"Told yeh, *nuthin'*," said Hagrid firmly. "Want a cuppa?"

"Come off it," said Ron, "you're in a right state!"

"I'm tellin' yeh, I'm fine," said Hagrid, straightening up and turning to beam at them all, but wincing. "Blimey, it's good ter see you three again — had good summers, did yeh?"

"Hagrid, you've been attacked!" said Ron.

"Fer the las' time, it's nuthin'!" said Hagrid firmly.

"Would you say it was nothing if one of us turned up with a pound of mince instead of a face?" Ron demanded.

"You ought to go and see Madam Pomfrey, Hagrid," said Hermione anxiously. "Some of those cuts look nasty."

"I'm dealin' with it, all righ'?" said Hagrid repressively.

He walked across to the enormous wooden table that stood in the middle of his cabin and twitched aside a tea towel that had been lying on it. Underneath was a raw, bloody, green-tinged steak slightly

larger than the average car tire.

“You’re not going to eat that, are you, Hagrid?” said Ron, leaning in for a closer look. “It looks poisonous.”

“It’s s’posed ter look like that, it’s dragon meat,” Hagrid said. “An’ I didn’ get it ter eat.”

He picked up the steak and slapped it over the left side of his face. Greenish blood trickled down into his beard as he gave a soft moan of satisfaction.

“Tha’s better. It helps with the stingin’, yeh know.”

“So are you going to tell us what’s happened to you?” Harry asked.

“Can’, Harry. Top secret. More’n me job’s worth ter tell yeh that.”

“Did the giants beat you up, Hagrid?” asked Hermione quietly.

Hagrid’s fingers slipped on the dragon steak, and it slid squelchily onto his chest.

“Giants?” said Hagrid, catching the steak before it reached his belt and slapping it back over his face. “Who said anythin’ abou’ giants? Who yeh bin talkin’ to? Who’s told yeh what I’ve — who’s said I’ve bin — eh?”

“We guessed,” said Hermione apologetically.

“Oh, yeh did, did yeh?” said Hagrid, fixing her sternly with the eye that was not hidden by the steak.

“It was kind of . . . obvious,” said Ron. Harry nodded.

Hagrid glared at them, then snorted, threw the steak onto the table again and strode back to the kettle, which was now whistling.

“Never known kids like you three fer knowin’ more’n yeh oughta,” he muttered, splashing boiling water into three of his bucket-shaped

mugs. “An’ I’m not complimentin’ yeh, neither. Nosy, some’d call it. Interferin’.”

But his beard twitched.

“So you have been to look for giants?” said Harry, grinning as he sat down at the table.

Hagrid set tea in front of each of them, sat down, picked up his steak again, and slapped it back over his face.

“Yeah, all righ’,” he grunted, “I have.”

“And you found them?” said Hermione in a hushed voice.

“Well, they’re not that difficult ter find, ter be honest,” said Hagrid. “Pretty big, see.”

“Where are they?” said Ron.

“Mountains,” said Hagrid unhelpfully.

“So why don’t Muggles — ?”

“They do,” said Hagrid darkly. “O’ny their deaths are always put down ter mountaineerin’ accidents, aren’ they?”

He adjusted the steak a little so that it covered the worst of the bruising.

“Come on, Hagrid, tell us what you’ve been up to!” said Ron.

“Tell us about being attacked by the giants and Harry can tell you about being attacked by the dementors —”

Hagrid choked in his mug and dropped his steak at the same time; a large quantity of spit, tea, and dragon blood was sprayed over the table as Hagrid coughed and spluttered and the steak slid, with a soft *splat*, onto the floor.

“Whadda yeh mean, attacked by dementors?” growled Hagrid.

“Didn’t you know?” Hermione asked him, wide-eyed.

“I don’ know anything that’s been happenin’ since I left. I was on a secret mission, wasn’ I, didn’ wan’ owls followin’ me all over the place — ruddy dementors! Yeh’re not serious?”

“Yeah, I am, they turned up in Little Whinging and attacked my cousin and me, and then the Ministry of Magic expelled me —”

“WHAT?”

“— and I had to go to a hearing and everything, but tell us about the giants first.”

“You were *expelled*?”

“Tell us about your summer and I’ll tell you about mine.”

Hagrid glared at him through his one open eye. Harry looked right back, an expression of innocent determination on his face.

“Oh, all righ’,” Hagrid said in a resigned voice.

He bent down and tugged the dragon steak out of Fang’s mouth.

“Oh, Hagrid, don’t, it’s not hygien —” Hermione began, but Hagrid had already slapped the meat back over his swollen eye. He took another fortifying gulp of tea and then said, “Well, we set off righ’ after term ended —”

“Madame Maxime went with you, then?” Hermione interjected.

“Yeah, tha’s right,” said Hagrid, and a softened expression appeared on the few inches of face that were not obscured by beard or green steak. “Yeah, it was jus’ the pair of us. An’ I’ll tell yeh this, she’s not afraid of roughin’ it, Olympe. Yeh know, she’s a fine, well-dressed woman, an’ knowin’ where we was goin’ I wondered ’ow she’d feel abou’ clamberin’ over boulders an’ sleepin’ in caves an’ tha’, bu’ she never complained once.”

“You knew where you were going?” Harry asked. “You knew where the giants were?”

“Well, Dumbledore knew, an’ he told us,” said Hagrid.

“Are they hidden?” asked Ron. “Is it a secret, where they are?”

“Not really,” said Hagrid, shaking his shaggy head. “It’s jus’ that mos’ wizards aren’ bothered where they are, s’ long as it’s a good long way away. But where they are’s very difficult ter get ter, fer humans anyway, so we needed Dumbledore’s instructions. Took us abou’ a month ter get there —”

“A *month*?” said Ron, as though he had never heard of a journey lasting such a ridiculously long time. “But — why couldn’t you just grab a Portkey or something?”

There was an odd expression in Hagrid’s unobscured eye as he squinted at Ron; it was almost pitying.

“We’re bein’ watched, Ron,” he said gruffly.

“What d’you mean?”

“Yeh don’ understand,” said Hagrid. “The Ministry’s keepin’ an eye on Dumbledore an’ anyone they reckon’s in league with him, an’ —”

“We know about that,” said Harry quickly, keen to hear the rest of Hagrid’s story. “We know about the Ministry watching Dumbledore —”

“So, you couldn’t use magic to get there?” asked Ron, looking thunderstruck. “You had to act like Muggles *all the way*?”

“Well, not exactly all the way,” said Hagrid cagily. “We jus’ had ter be careful, ’cause Olympe an’ me, we stick out a bit —”

Ron made a stifled noise somewhere between a snort and a sniff.

and hastily took a gulp of tea.

“— so we’re not hard ter follow. We was pretendin’ we was goin’ on holiday together, so we got inter France an’ we made like we was headin’ fer where Olympe’s school is, ’cause we knew we was bein’ tailed by someone from the Ministry. We had to go slow, ’cause I’m not really s’posed ter use magic an’ we knew the Ministry’d be lookin’ fer a reason ter run us in. But we managed ter give the berk tailin’ us the slip round abou’ Dee-John —”

“Ooooh, Dijon?” said Hermione excitedly. “I’ve been there on holiday, did you see — ?”

She fell silent at the look on Ron’s face.

“We chanced a bit o’ magic after that, and it wasn’ a bad journey. Ran inter a couple o’ mad trolls on the Polish border, an’ I had a sligh’ disagreement with a vampire in a pub in Minsk, but apart from tha’, couldn’t’a bin smoother.

“An’ then we reached the place, an’ we started trekkin’ up through the mountains, lookin’ fer signs of ’em . .

“We had ter lay off the magic once we got near ’em. Partly ’cause they don’ like wizards an’ we didn’ want ter put their backs up too soon, and partly ’cause Dumbledore had warned us You-Know-Who was bound ter be after the giants an’ all. Said it was odds on he’d sent a messenger off ter them already. Told us ter be very careful of drawin’ attention ter ourselves as we got nearer in case there was Death Eaters around.”

Hagrid paused for a long draught of tea.

“Go on!” said Harry urgently.

“Found ’em,” said Hagrid baldly. “Went over a ridge one nigh’ an’

there they was, spread ou' underneath us. Little fires burnin' below an' huge shadows . . . It was like watchin' bits o' the mountain movin'."

"How big are they?" asked Ron in a hushed voice.

"'Bout twenty feet," said Hagrid casually. "Some o' the bigger ones mighta bin twenty-five."

"And how many were there?" asked Harry.

"I reckon abou' seventy or eighty," said Hagrid.

"Is that all?" said Hermione.

"Yep," said Hagrid sadly, "eighty left, an' there was loads once, musta bin a hundred diff'rent tribes from all over the world. But they've bin dyin' out fer ages. Wizards killed a few, o' course, but mostly they killed each other, an' now they're dyin' out faster than ever. They're not made ter live bunched up together like tha'. Dumbledore says it's our fault, it was the wizards who forced 'em to go an' made 'em live a good long way from us an' they had no choice but ter stick together fer their own protection."

"So," said Harry, "you saw them and then what?"

"Well, we waited till morning, didn' want ter go sneakin' up on 'em in the dark, fer our own safety," said Hagrid. "'Bout three in the mornin' they fell asleep jus' where they was sittin'. We didn' dare sleep. Fer one thing, we wanted ter make sure none of 'em woke up an' came up where we were, an' fer another, the snorin' was unbelievable. Caused an avalanche near mornin'.

"Anyway, once it was light we wen' down ter see 'em."

"Just like that?" said Ron, looking awestruck. "You just walked right into a giant camp?"

“Well, Dumbledore’d told us how ter do it,” said Hagrid. “Give the Gurg gifts, show some respect, yeh know.”

“Give the *what* gifts?” asked Harry.

“Oh, the Gurg — means the chief.”

“How could you tell which one was the Gurg?” asked Ron.

Hagrid grunted in amusement.

“No problem,” he said. “He was the biggest, the ugliest, an’ the laziest. Sittin’ there waitin’ ter be brought food by the others. Dead goats an’ such like. Name o’ Karkus. I’d put him at twenty-two, twenty-three feet, an’ the weight of a couple o’ bull elephants. Skin like rhino hide an’ all.”

“And you just walked up to him?” said Hermione breathlessly.

“Well, . . . *down* ter him, where he was lyin’ in the valley. They was in this dip between four pretty high mountains, see, beside a mountain lake, an’ Karkus was lyin’ by the lake roarin’ at the others ter feed him an’ his wife. Olympe an’ I went down the mountainside —”

“But didn’t they try and kill you when they saw you?” asked Ron incredulously.

“It was def’nitely on some of their minds,” said Hagrid, shrugging, “but we did what Dumbledore told us ter do, which was ter hold our gift up high an’ keep our eyes on the Gurg an’ ignore the others. So tha’s what we did. An’ the rest of ’em went quiet an’ watched us pass an’ we got right up ter Karkus’s feet an’ we bowed an’ put our present down in front o’ him.”

“What do you give a giant?” asked Ron eagerly. “Food?”

“Nah, he can get food all righ’ fer himself,” said Hagrid. “We took

him magic. Giants like magic, jus' don't like us usin' it against 'em. Anyway, that firs' day we gave him a branch o' Gubraithian fire."

Hermione said "wow" softly, but Harry and Ron both frowned in puzzlement.

"A branch of — ?"

"Everlasting fire," said Hermione irritably, "you ought to know that by now, Professor Flitwick's mentioned it at least twice in class!"

"Well anyway," said Hagrid quickly, intervening before Ron could answer back, "Dumbledore'd bewitched this branch to burn evermore, which isn' somethin' any wizard could do, an' so I lies it down in the snow by Karkus's feet and says, 'A gift to the Gurg of the giants from Albus Dumbledore, who sends his respectful greetings.'"

"And what did Karkus say?" asked Harry eagerly.

"Nothin'," said Hagrid. "Didn' speak English."

"You're kidding!"

"Didn' matter," said Hagrid imperturbably, "Dumbledore had warned us tha' migh' happen. Karkus knew enough to yell fer a couple o' giants who knew our lingo an' they translated fer us."

"And did he like the present?" asked Ron.

"Oh yeah, it went down a storm once they understood what it was," said Hagrid, turning his dragon steak over to press the cooler side to his swollen eye. "Very pleased. So then I said, 'Albus Dumbledore asks the Gurg to speak with his messenger when he returns tomorrow with another gift.'"

"Why couldn't you speak to them that day?" asked Hermione.

"Dumbledore wanted us ter take it very slow," said Hagrid. "Let

'em see we kept our promises. *We'll come back tomorrow with another present*, an' then we do come back with another present — gives a good impression, see? An' gives them time ter test out the firs' present an' find out it's a good one, an' get 'em eager fer more. In any case, giants like Karkus — overload 'em with information an' they'll kill yeh jus' to simplify things. So we bowed outta the way an' went off an' found ourselves a nice little cave ter spend that night in, an' the followin' mornin' we went back an' this time we found Karkus sittin' up waitin' fer us lookin' all eager."

"And you talked to him?"

"Oh yeah. Firs' we presented him with a nice battle helmet — goblin-made an' indestructible, yeh know — an' then we sat down an' we talked."

"What did he say?"

"Not much," said Hagrid. "Listened mostly. But there were good signs. He'd heard o' Dumbledore, heard he'd argued against the killin' of the last giants in Britain. Karkus seemed ter be quite int'rested in what Dumbledore had ter say. An' a few o' the others, 'specially the ones who had some English, they gathered round an' listened too. We were hopeful when we left that day. Promised ter come back next day with another present."

"But that night it all wen' wrong."

"What d'you mean?" said Ron quickly

"Well, like I say, they're not meant ter live together, giants," said Hagrid sadly. "Not in big groups like that. They can' help themselves, they half-kill each other every few weeks. The men fight each other an' the women fight each other, the remnants of the old tribes fight

each other, an' that's even without squabbles over food an' the best fires an' sleepin' spots. Yeh'd think, seein' as how their whole race is about finished, they'd lay off each other, but . . .”

Hagrid sighed deeply.

“That night a fight broke out, we saw it from the mouth of our cave, lookin' down on the valley. Went on fer hours, yeh wouldn' believe the noise. An' when the sun came up the snow was scarlet an' his head was lyin' at the bottom o' the lake.”

“Whose head?” gasped Hermione.

“Karkus's,” said Hagrid heavily. “There was a new Gurg, Golgomath.” He sighed deeply. “Well, we hadn' bargained on a new Gurg two days after we'd made friendly contact with the firs' one, an' we had a funny feelin' Golgomath wouldn' be so keen ter listen to us, but we had ter try.”

“You went to speak to him?” asked Ron incredulously. “After you'd watched him rip off another giant's head?”

“Course we did,” said Hagrid, “we hadn' gone all that way ter give up after two days! We wen' down with the next present we'd meant ter give ter Karkus.

“I knew it was no go before I'd opened me mouth. He was sitting there wearin' Karkus's helmet, leerin' at us as we got nearer. He's massive, one o' the biggest ones there. Black hair an' matchin' teeth an' a necklace o' bones. Human-lookin' bones, some of 'em. Well, I gave it a go — held out a great roll o' dragon skin — an' said ‘A gift fer the Gurg of the giants —’ Nex' thing I knew, I was hangin' upside down in the air by me feet, two of his mates had grabbed me.”

Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth.

“How did you get out of *that*?” asked Harry.

“Wouldn’ta done if Olympe hadn’t bin there,” said Hagrid. “She pulled out her wand an’ did some o’ the fastest’ spellwork I’ve ever seen. Ruddy marvelous. Hit the two holdin’ me right in the eyes with Conjunctivitus Curses an’ they dropped me straightaway — bu’ we were in trouble then, ’cause we’d used magic against ’em, an’ that’s what giants hate abou’ wizards. We had ter leg it an’ we knew there was no way we was going ter be able ter march inter camp again.”

“Blimey, Hagrid,” said Ron quietly.

“So how come it’s taken you so long to get home if you were only there for three days?” asked Hermione.

“We didn’ leave after three days!” said Hagrid, looking outraged. “Dumbledore was relyin’ on us!”

“But you’ve just said there was no way you could go back!”

“Not by daylight, we couldn’, no. We just had ter rethink a bit. Spent a couple o’ days lyin’ low up in the cave an’ watchin’. An’ wha’ we saw wasn’ good.”

“Did he rip off more heads?” asked Hermione, sounding squeamish.

“No,” said Hagrid. “I wish he had.”

“What d’you mean?”

“I mean we soon found out he didn’ object ter all wizards — just us.”

“Death Eaters?” said Harry quickly.

“Yep,” said Hagrid darkly. “Couple of ’em were visitin’ him ev’ry day, bringin’ gifts ter the Gurg, an’ he wasn’ dangling them upside down.”

“How d’you know they were Death Eaters?” said Ron.

“Because I recognized one of ’em,” Hagrid growled. “Macnair, remember him? Bloke they sent ter kill Buckbeak? Maniac, he is. Likes killin’ as much as Golgomath, no wonder they were gettin’ on so well.”

“So Macnair’s persuaded the giants to join You-Know-Who?” said Hermione desperately.

“Hold yer hippogriffs, I haven’ finished me story yet!” said Hagrid indignantly, who, considering he had not wanted to tell them anything in the first place, now seemed to be rather enjoying himself. “Me an’ Olympe talked it over an’ we agreed, jus’ ’cause the Gurg looked like favorin’ You-Know-Who didn’ mean all of ’em would. We had ter try an’ persuade some o’ the others, the ones who hadn’ wanted Golgomath as Gurg.”

“How could you tell which ones they were?” asked Ron.

“Well, they were the ones bein’ beaten to a pulp, weren’ they?” said Hagrid patiently. “The ones with any sense were keepin’ outta Golgomath’s way, hidin’ out in caves roun’ the gully jus’ like we were. So we decided we’d go pokin’ round the caves by night an’ see if we couldn’ persuade a few o’ them.”

“You went poking around dark caves looking for giants?” said Ron with awed respect in his voice.

“Well, it wasn’ the giants who worried us most,” said Hagrid. “We were more concerned abou’ the Death Eaters. Dumbledore had told us before we wen’ not ter tangle with ’em if we could avoid it, an’ the trouble was they knew we was around — ’spect Golgomath told him abou’ us. At night when the giants were sleepin’ an’ we wanted

ter be creepin' inter the caves, Macnair an' the other one were sneakin' round the mountains lookin' fer us. I was hard put to stop Olympe jumpin' out at them," said Hagrid, the corners of his mouth lifting his wild beard. "She was rarin' ter attack 'em. . . . She's somethin' when she's roused, Olympe. . . . Fiery, yeh know. . . . 'spect it's the French in her. . . ."

Hagrid gazed misty-eyed into the fire. Harry allowed him thirty seconds' reminiscence before clearing his throat loudly.

"So what happened? Did you ever get near any of the other giants?"

"What? Oh. . . . oh yeah, we did! Yeah, on the third night after Karkus was killed, we crept outta the cave we'd bin hidin' in and headed back down inter the gully, keepin' our eyes skinned fer the Death Eaters. Got inside a few o' the caves, no go — then, in about the sixth one, we found three giants hidin'."

"Cave must've been cramped," said Ron.

"Wasn' room ter swing a kneazle," said Hagrid.

"Didn't they attack you when they saw you?" asked Hermione.

"Probably woulda done if they'd bin in any condition," said Hagrid, "but they was badly hurt, all three o' them. Golgomath's lot had beaten 'em unconscious; they'd woken up an' crawled inter the nearest shelter they could find. Anyway, one o' them had a bit of English an' 'e translated fer the others, an' what we had ter say didn' seem ter go down too badly. So we kep' goin' back, visitin' the wounded. . . . I reckon we had about six or seven o' them convinced at one poin'."

"Six or seven?" said Ron eagerly. "Well that's not bad — are they

going to come over here and start fighting You-Know-Who with us?"

But Hermione said, "What do you mean 'at one point,' Hagrid?"

Hagrid looked at her sadly.

"Golgomath's lot raided the caves. The ones tha' survived didn' wan' no more ter to do with us after that."

"So . . . so there aren't any giants coming?" said Ron, looking disappointed.

"Nope," said Hagrid, heaving a deep sigh as he turned over his steak again and applied the cooler side to his face, "but we did wha' we meant ter do, we gave 'em Dumbledore's message an' some o' them heard it an' I 'spect some o' them'll remember it. Jus' maybe, them that don' want ter stay around Golgomath'll move outta the mountains, an' there's gotta be a chance they'll remember Dumbledore's friendly to 'em. . . . Could be they'll come. . . ."

Snow was filling up the window now. Harry became aware that the knees of his robes were soaked through; Fang was drooling with his head in Harry's lap.

"Hagrid?" said Hermione quietly after a while.

"Mmm?"

"Did you . . . was there any sign of . . . did you hear anything about your . . . your . . . mother while you were there?"

Hagrid's unobscured eye rested upon her, and Hermione looked rather scared.

"I'm sorry . . . I . . . forget it—"

"Dead," Hagrid grunted. "Died years ago. They told me."

"Oh . . . I'm . . . I'm really sorry," said Hermione in a very small voice.

Hagrid shrugged his massive shoulders. "No need," he said shortly. "Can' remember her much. Wasn' a great mother."

They were silent again. Hermione glanced nervously at Harry and Ron, plainly wanting them to speak.

"But you still haven't explained how you got in this state, Hagrid," Ron said, gesturing toward Hagrid's bloodstained face.

"Or why you're back so late," said Harry. "Sirius says Madame Maxime got back ages ago —"

"Who attacked you?" said Ron.

"I haven' bin attacked!" said Hagrid emphatically. "I —"

But the rest of his words were drowned in a sudden outbreak of rapping on the door. Hermione gasped; her mug slipped through her fingers and smashed on the floor; Fang yelped. All four of them stared at the window beside the doorway. The shadow of somebody small and squat rippled across the thin curtain.

"It's her!" Ron whispered.

"Get under here!" Harry said quickly, seizing the Invisibility Cloak he whirled it over himself and Hermione while Ron tore around the table and dived beneath the Cloak as well. Huddled together they backed away into a corner. Fang was barking madly at the door. Hagrid looked thoroughly confused.

"Hagrid, hide our mugs!"

Hagrid seized Harry's and Ron's mugs and shoved them under the cushion in Fang's basket. Fang was now leaping up at the door; Hagrid pushed him out of the way with his foot and pulled it open.

Professor Umbridge was standing in the doorway wearing her green tweed cloak and a matching hat with earflaps. Lips pursed, she

leaned back so as to see Hagrid's face; she barely reached his navel.

"So," she said slowly and loudly, as though speaking to somebody deaf. "You're Hagrid, are you?"

Without waiting for an answer she strolled into the room, her bulging eyes rolling in every direction.

"Get away," she snapped, waving her handbag at Fang, who had bounded up to her and was attempting to lick her face.

"Er — I don't want ter be rude," said Hagrid, staring at her, "but who the ruddy hell are you?"

"My name is Dolores Umbridge."

Her eyes were sweeping the cabin. Twice they stared directly into the corner where Harry stood, sandwiched between Ron and Hermione.

"Dolores Umbridge?" Hagrid said, sounding thoroughly confused. "I thought you were one o' them Ministry — don't you work with Fudge?"

"I was Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, yes," said Umbridge, now pacing around the cabin, taking in every tiny detail within, from the haversack against the wall to the abandoned traveling cloak. "I am now the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher —"

"Tha's brave of yeh," said Hagrid, "there's not many'd take tha' job anymore —"

"— and Hogwarts High Inquisitor," said Umbridge, giving no sign that she had heard him.

"Wha's that?" said Hagrid, frowning.

"Precisely what I was going to ask," said Umbridge, pointing at

the broken shards of china on the floor that had been Hermione's mug.

"Oh," said Hagrid, with a most unhelpful glance toward the corner where Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood hidden, "oh, tha' was . . . was Fang. He broke a mug. So I had ter use this one instead."

Hagrid pointed to the mug from which he had been drinking, one hand still clamped over the dragon steak pressed to his eye. Umbridge stood facing him now, taking in every detail of his appearance instead of the cabin's.

"I heard voices," she said quietly.

"I was talkin' ter Fang," said Hagrid stoutly.

"And was he talking back to you?"

"Well . . . in a manner o' speakin'," said Hagrid, looking uncomfortable. "I sometimes say Fang's near enough human —"

"There are three sets of footprints in the snow leading from the castle doors to your cabin," said Umbridge sleekly.

Hermione gasped; Harry clapped a hand over her mouth. Luckily, Fang was sniffing loudly around the hem of Professor Umbridge's robes, and she did not appear to have heard.

"Well, I on'y jus' got back," said Hagrid, waving an enormous hand at the haversack. "Maybe someone came ter call earlier an' I missed 'em."

"There are no footsteps leading away from your cabin door."

"Well I . . . I don' know why that'd be . . ." said Hagrid, tugging nervously at his beard and again glancing toward the corner where Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood, as though asking for help. "Erm . . ."

Umbridge wheeled around and strode the length of the cabin, looking around carefully. She bent and peered under the bed. She opened Hagrid's cupboards. She passed within two inches of where Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood pressed against the wall; Harry actually pulled in his stomach as she walked by. After looking carefully inside the enormous cauldron Hagrid used for cooking she wheeled around again and said, "What has happened to you? How did you sustain those injuries?"

Hagrid hastily removed the dragon steak from his face, which in Harry's opinion was a mistake, because the black-and-purple bruising all around his eye was now clearly visible, not to mention the large amount of fresh and congealed blood on his face. "Oh, I had a bit of an accident," he said lamely.

"What sort of accident?"

"I-I tripped."

"You tripped," she repeated coolly.

"Yeah, tha's right. Over . . . over a friend's broomstick. I don' fly, meself. Well, look at the size o' me, I don' reckon there's a broomstick that'd hold me. Friend o' mine breeds Abraxan horses, I dunno if you've ever seen 'em, big beasts, winged, yeh know, I've had a bit of a ride on one o' them an' it was —"

"Where have you been?" asked Umbridge, cutting coolly through Hagrid's babbling.

"Where've I . . . ?"

"Been, yes," she said. "Term started more than two months ago. Another teacher has had to cover your classes. None of your colleagues has been able to give me any information as to your

whereabouts. You left no address. Where have you been?"

There was a pause in which Hagrid stared at her with his newly uncovered eye. Harry could almost hear his brain working furiously.

"I — I've been away for me health," he said.

"For your health," said Umbridge. Her eyes traveled over Hagrid's discolored and swollen face; dragon blood dripped gently onto his waistcoat in the silence. "I see."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, "bit o' — o' fresh air, yeh know —"

"Yes, as gamekeeper fresh air must be so difficult to come by," said Umbridge sweetly. The small patch of Hagrid's face that was not black or purple flushed.

"Well — change o' scene, yeh know —"

"Mountain scenery?" said Umbridge swiftly.

She knows, Harry thought desperately.

"Mountains?" Hagrid repeated, clearly thinking fast. "Nope, South of France fer me. Bit o' sun an' . . . an' sea."

"Really?" said Umbridge. "You don't have much of a tan."

"Yeah . . . well . . . sensitive skin," said Hagrid, attempting an ingratiating smile. Harry noticed that two of his teeth had been knocked out. Umbridge looked at him coldly; his smile faltered. Then she hoisted her handbag a little higher into the crook of her arm and said, "I shall, of course, be informing the Minister of your late return."

"Righ'," said Hagrid, nodding.

"You ought to know too that as High Inquisitor it is my unfortunate but necessary duty to inspect my fellow teachers. So I daresay we shall meet again soon enough."

She turned sharply and marched back to the door.

“You’re inspectin’ us?” Hagrid echoed blankly, looking after her.

“Oh yes,” said Umbridge softly, looking back at him with her hand on the door handle. “The Ministry is determined to weed out unsatisfactory teachers, Hagrid. Good night.”

She left, closing the door behind her with a snap. Harry made to pull off the Invisibility Cloak but Hermione seized his wrist.

“Not yet,” she breathed in his ear. “She might not be gone yet.”

Hagrid seemed to be thinking the same way; he stumped across the room and pulled back the curtain an inch or so.

“She’s goin’ back ter the castle,” he said in a low voice. “Blimey . . . inspectin’ people, is she?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, pulling the Cloak off. “Trelawney’s on probation already . . .”

“Um . . . what sort of thing are you planning to do with us in class, Hagrid?” asked Hermione.

“Oh, don’ you worry abou’ that, I’ve got a great load o’ lessons planned,” said Hagrid enthusiastically, scooping up his dragon steak from the table and slapping it over his eye again. “I’ve bin keepin’ a couple o’ creatures saved fer yer O.W.L. year, you wait, they’re somethin’ really special.”

“Erm . . . special in what way?” asked Hermione tentatively.

“I’m not sayin’,” said Hagrid happily. “I don’ want ter spoil the surprise.”

“Look, Hagrid,” said Hermione urgently, dropping all pretense. “Professor Umbridge won’t be at all happy if you bring anything to class that’s too dangerous —”

“Dangerous?” said Hagrid, looking genially bemused. “Don’ be silly, I wouldn’ give yeh anythin’ dangerous! I mean, all righ’, they can look after themselves —”

“Hagrid, you’ve got to pass Umbridge’s inspection, and to do that it would really be better if she saw you teaching us how to look after porlocks, how to tell the difference between knarls and hedgehogs, stuff like that!” said Hermione earnestly.

“But tha’s not very interestin’, Hermione,” said Hagrid. “The stuff I’ve got’s much more impressive, I’ve bin bringin’ ’em on fer years, I reckon I’ve got the on’y domestic herd in Britain —”

“Hagrid . . . please . . .” said Hermione, a note of real desperation in her voice. “Umbridge is looking for any excuse to get rid of teachers she thinks are too close to Dumbledore. Please, Hagrid, teach us something dull that’s bound to come up in our O.W.L. . . .”

But Hagrid merely yawned widely and cast a one-eyed look of longing toward the vast bed in the corner.

“Lis’en, it’s bin a long day an’ it’s late,” he said, patting Hermione gently on the shoulder, so that her knees gave way and hit the floor with a thud. “Oh — sorry —” He pulled her back up by the neck of her robes. “Look, don’ you go worryin’ abou’ me, I promise yeh I’ve got really good stuff planned fer yer lessons now I’m back . . . Now you lot had better get back up to the castle, an’ don’ forget ter wipe yer footprints out behind yeh!”

“I dunno if you got through to him,” said Ron a short while later when, having checked that the coast was clear, they walked back up to the castle through the thickening snow, leaving no trace behind them due to the Obliteration Charm Hermione was performing as they

went.

“Then I’ll go back again tomorrow,” said Hermione determinedly. “I’ll plan his lessons for him if I have to. I don’t care if she throws out Trelawney but she’s not taking Hagrid!”

Hagrid se verhaal

Harry nael na die seuns se slaapsaal om die onsigbaarheidsmantel en die Plunderaar se Kaart uit sy trommel te gaan haal. Hy is so gou terug dat hy en Ron minstens vyf minute voor Hermien gereed is om te gaan. Toe Hermien uit die meisies se slaapsaal kom, dra sy 'n serp, handskoene en een van haar gebreide elfhoede.

“Wel, dis koud daar buite!” kap sy terug toe Ron sy tong ongeduldig klik.

Hulle kruip deur die portretopening en gooi die onsigbaarheidsmantel oor hulle. Ron het so lank geword, hy moet krom loop anders steek sy voete uit. Hulle sluip versigtig met die stelle trappe af en gaan staan elke nou en dan om op die kaart te kyk waar Fillis en mevrou Norris is. Hulle is gelukkig; hulle sien niemand behalwe Nick-amper-sonder-kop wat droomverlore verbysweef terwyl hy iets neurie wat vreeslik baie soos “Weasley is ons Koning” klink.

Hulle sluip deur die ingangsportaal en uit na die stil, sneeubedekte terrein. Harry se hart spring toe hy die goue blokke lig en rook uit Hagrid se skoorsteen sien. Hy stap vinnig aan en die ander twee kom struikelend agterna. Hulle beweeg knarsend deur sneeu wat al dikker word tot by Hagrid se houtvoor deur. Harry lig sy vuus en klop drie keer. 'n Hond begin blaf verwoed aan die binnekant.

“Hagrid, dis ons!” skree Harry deur die sleutelgat.

“Moes geweet het!” sê 'n growwe stem.

Onder die mantel kyk hulle stralend na mekaar. Hulle kan aan Hagrid se stem hoor dat hy ook bly is. “Skaars drie sekondes by die huis . . . skoert, Tande . . . gee pad, jou dom brak . . .”

Die grendel word teruggestoot, die deur gaan krakend oop en Hagrid se kop verskyn in die gaping.

Hermien skree.

“Merlin se baard, saggies!” sê Hagrid vinnig en staar angstig oor hul koppe. “Julle is onder daardie mantel, he? Wel, kom in, kom in!”

“Ek is jammer,” sê Hermien toe hulle verby Hagrid skuifel en die mantel afhaal sodat hy hulle kan sien. “Dis net – o, Hagrid!”

"Dis niks, dis niks," sê Hagrid gou. Hy maak die deur agter hulle toe en trek gou al die gordyne toe, maar Hermien staan nog steeds geskok na hom.

Sy hare is vol gekoekte bloed en sy linkeroog is 'n pofferige skreuk in 'n massa pers en swart kneusings. Daar is talle snye op sy gesig en hande, sommige bloei nog, en hy beweeg pynlik versigtig sodat Harry die indruk kry dat van sy ribbes gebreek is. Dis duidelik dat hy pas tuisgekom het. 'n Dik swart reismantel hang oor die rug van 'n stoel en 'n knapsak, groot genoeg om etlike klein kindertjies in te prop, leun teen die muur langs die deur. Hagrid, wat twee maal groter as 'n normale man is, hink na die vuur en hang 'n koperketel daaroor.

"Wat het met jou gebeur?" vra Harry terwyl Tande om hulle rondspring en probeer om hulle gesigte te lek.

"Ek het mos gesê, niks," sê Hagrid flink. "Tee?"

"Komaan," sê Ron. "Kyk hoe lyk jy!"

"Ek sê mos ek's oukei." Hagrid kom orent en wil vir hulle glimlag, maar sy gesig vertrek van pyn. "Jislaaik, dis goed om julle drie weer te sien – lekker vakansie gehou?"

"Hagrid, jy's aangerand!" sê Ron.

"Vir die laaste keer, dis niks!" sê Hagrid beslis.

"Sal jy sê dis niks as een van ons hier opdaag met 'n paar gram maalvleis pleks van 'n gesig?" vra Ron.

"Jy moet vir Madame Pomfrey gaan sien, Hagrid," sê Hermien angstig. "Daardie snye lyk nie goed nie."

"Ek sal self daarna kyk, oukei?" sê Hagrid kortaf.

Hy stap na die groot houttafel in die middel van sy hut en tel 'n vadoek op. Hulle sien 'n stuk rou, bloederige biefstuk, groenerig en 'n bietjie groter as 'n motorwiel.

"Jy gaan dit darem seker nie eet nie, hè, Hagrid?" Ron bekyk dit van naderby. "Dit lyk giftig."

"Dit moet so lyk, dis draakvleis. En ek het dit nie gekry om te eet nie."

Hagrid tel die stuk vleis op en plak dit oor die linkerkant van sy gesig. Groenerige bloed drup in sy baard. Hy kreun saggies. "Dis beter, dit help vir die brand, weet julle"

"Gaan jy nou vir ons vertel wat met jou gebeur het?" vra Harry.

"Kan nie, Harry. Streng geheim. Nie my werk werd om te vertel nie."

"Het die reuse jou so geslaan, Hagrid?" vra Hermien sag.

Hagrid se vingers glip op die draakvleis en dit gly af tot op sy bors.

“Reuse?” Hy vang die stuk vleis net voor dit sy gordel bereik en plak dit weer op sy gesig. “Wie het enigiets van reuse gesê? Met wiet julle gepraat? Wiet vir julle gesê wat ek – wiet gesê ek het – he?”

“Ons het geraai,” sê Hermien verskonend.

“O ja, nogal, nè?” Hagrid kyk streng na haar uit die oog waarop daar nie ’n homp vleis is nie.

“Dis soort van . . . klaarblyklik,” sê Ron en Harry knik.

Hagrid gluur na hulle. Dan snork hy, gooi die stuk vleis op die tafel neer en stap na die ketel wat begin fluit het.

“Het nog geen ander kinders teëgekom met julle gawe om goed te weet wat hulle nie moet weet nie,” mopper hy terwyl hy kookwater in drie van sy emmervorm bekere skink. “En dis nie ’n compliment nie, hoor. Nuuskierig, dis wat julle is. Inmengerig.”

Maar sy baard bewe.

“Dan het jy die reuse gaan soek?” Harry gaan sit met ’n glimlag by die tafel.

Hagrid gee vir elkeen ’n beker tee aan, gaan sit en plak weer die homp vleis oor sy gesig.

“Ja, goed, ek het,” brom hy.

“En het jy hulle gekry?” vra Hermien gesmoord.

“Wel, dis nie juis moeilik om hulle te kry nie, om nou eerlik te wees. Redelik groot, sien.”

“Waar is hulle?” vra Ron.

“Berge,” sê Hagrid onhulpvaardig.

“Hoekom sien die Moggels dan nie – ”

“Hulle sien,” sê Hagrid somber. “Dis net dat hulle altyd in die berge ‘verongeluk’.”

Hy skuif die stuk vleis sodat dit die ergste kneusplekke op sy gesig toemaak.

“Komaan, Hagrid, vertel vir ons waarmee jy besig was!” sê Ron. “Vertel ons hoe die reuse jou aangeval het, dan kan Harry vir jou vertel hoe die Dementors hom – ”

Hagrid stik in sy tee en laat val terselfdertyd die stuk vleis. Hy gaan aan die hoes en ’n groot klomp spoeg, tee en draakbloed spat oor die tafel. Die homp vleis val met ’n sagte plof op die vloer.

“Wat bedoel jy, aangeval deur Dementors?” grom hy.

“Weet jy nie daarvan nie?” sê Hermien verwonderd.

“Ek weet van niks wat gebeur het vandat ek weg is nie. Ek was op ’n geheime sending en ek wou nie gehad het uile moet my oral volg nie – verbrande Dementors! Julle’s seker nie ernstig nie?”

“Ja, ek is. Hulle was in Little Whinging en hulle het my en my neef aangeval en toe’t die Ministerie vir Towerkuns my geskors – ”

“WAT?”

“– en ek moes na ’n verhoor gaan en alles, maar vertel ons eers van die reuse.”

“Jy was gekors?”

“Vertel ons van jou vakansie, dan vertel ek jou van myne.”

Hagrid gluur na Harry met sy goeie oog. Harry kyk met ’n onskuldige uitdrukking vasberade terug.

“Ag, oukei dan,” gee Hagrid in.

Hy buk af en wikkkel die stuk draakvleis uit Tande se bek.

“Hagrid, jy kan nie, dis nie higiënies –” begin Hermien, maar Hagrid het dit reeds weer op sy geswelde oog geplak.

Hy neem nog ’n sluk tee vir versterking voor hy begin. “Nou goed, ons is weg aan die einde van die kwartaal –”

“Madame Maxime het saam met jou gegaan, nè?” val Hermien hom in die rede.

“Ja, dis reg,” sê Hagrid en ’n sagte uitdrukking kruip oor die gedeelte van sy gesig wat nie vol baard of groen vleis is nie. “Ja, dit was net ons twee. En laat ek julle vertel, sy skrik vir niks, daardie Olympe. Weet julle, daardie vrou trek so pragtig aan, en omdat ek geweet het wat voorlê, het ek regtig gewonder hoe sy daarvan gaan hou om oor rotse te klim en in grotte te slaap en alles, maar sy’t nie een keer gekla nie.”

“En jy het geweet waarheen om te gaan?” herhaal Harry. “Jy het geweet waar die reuse is?”

“Dompeldorius het geweet en vir ons beduie,” sê Hagrid.

“Kruip hulle weg?” vra Ron. “Is dit ’n geheim waar hulle is?”

“Nie regtig nie.” Hagrid skud sy ruie kop. “Dis net dat die meeste towenaars nie eintlik worrie waar hulle is nie, solank dit net ver weg is. Maar dis baie moeilik om by hulle uit te kom, vir mense in elk geval, dus het ons Dompeldorius se instruksies nodig gehad. Het ons amper ’n maand gevat.”

“’n Maand?” sê Ron asof hy nog nooit gehoor het van ’n reis wat so lank duur nie. “Maar – hoekom het julle nie net ’n Poortsleutel of iets gebruik nie?”

Daar is ’n vreemde, amper bejammerende uitdrukking in die goeie oog waarmee Hagrid na Ron kyk.

“Ons word dopgehou, Ron,” sê hy skor.

“Wat bedoel jy?”

“Julle verstaan nie. Die Ministerie hou Dompeldorius en almal wat hulle dink met hom saamspan fyn dop en –”

“Ons weet die Ministerie hou vir Dompeldorius dop,” sê Harry vinnig, wat graag die res van die storie wil hoor.

“Dus kon julle nie toor om daar te kom nie!” Ron lyk geskok. “Julle moes *die hele ent pad* soos Moggels reis?”

“Wel, nie die hele ent nie,” sê Hagrid ontwykend. “Ons moes net versigtig wees, want ek en Olympe staan ’n bietjie uit –”

Ron snork effens en vat ’n sluk tee.

– en dis nie moeilik om ons te volg nie. Ons het gemaak of ons saam met vakansie gaan. Ons is Frankryk toe waar Olympe se skool is, want ons het geweet iemand van die Ministerie is op ons hakke. Ons het stadig gevorder, want ek mag nie eintlik toor nie en ons het geweet die Ministerie soek ’n rede om ons vas te trap. Maar ons het dit reggekry om ons agtervolger af te skud, min of meer by Die-John –”

“Ooooo, Dijon!” sê Hermien opgewonde. “Ek was daar met vakansie. Het julle gesien –!”

Sy bly stil toe sy die uitdrukking op Ron se gesig sien.

“Ons het daarna ’n bietjie getoor en glad nie sleg gereis nie. Het ons by die Poolse grens in ’n paar mal trolle vasgeloop en ek het so effens vasgesit met ’n vampier in ’n kroeg in Minsk, maar verder was daar nie probleme nie.

“En toe was ons daar. Ons is die berge in op soek na tekens van hulle, en ons moes ophou toor toe ons naby hulle kom. Deels omdat hulle nie van towenaars hou nie en ons hulle nie wou kwaad maak nie, en deels omdat Dompeldorius ons gewaarsku het dat Jy-Weet-Wie ook agter die reuse aan is. Hy’t gesê daar’s ’n goeie kans dat Jy-Weet-Wie klaar ’n boodskapper soontoe gestuur het. Hy’t gesê ons moet baie versigtig wees en nie die aandag op ons vestig nie ingeval daar Doodseters is.”

Hagrid bly stil en teug diep aan sy tee.

“Gaan aan!” sê Harry dringend.

“Het hulle gekry,” sê Hagrid pront. “Het een nag oor ’n rant gegaan en daar was hulle onder ons. Vuurtjies wat brand en groot skaduwees ... dit was soos om stukke berg te sien beweeg.”

“Hoe groot is hulle?” vra Ron in ’n benoude stem.

“’n Goeie ses meter,” sê Hagrid saaklik. “Party van die grotes kan selfs sewe meter wees.”

“En hoeveel was daar?” vra Harry.

“Ek sou reken so tagtig.”

“Is dit al?” vra Hermien.

“Ja,” sê Hagrid stroef. “Tagtig plus. Daar was altyd hordes. Daar was oor ’n honderd verskillende stamme regoor die wêreld, maar hulle is vinnig besig om uit te sterf. Towenaars het natuurlik ’n groot klomp doodgemaak, maar dis eintlik hulle wat mekaar doodslaan,

nou sterf hulle nog vinniger as tevore uit. Hulle's nie gemaak om so op 'n hoop te bly nie. Dompeldorius sê dis ons skuld, dit was die towenaars wat hulle weggejaag en gedwing het om ver van ons te gaan bly en nou moet hulle vir hulle eie veiligheid bymekaar woon."

"En toe?" sê Harry. "toe sien julle hulle en toe wat?"

"Wel, ons wag toe tot die oggend. Wou nie in die donker nader luip nie, vir veiligheid. Hulle het hier teen drie-uur die oggend aan die slaap geraak, net daar waar hulle sit. Ons het dit nie gewaag om te slaap nie. Ons wou seker wees een van hulle word nie dalk wakker en kom op ons af nie, en wat meer is, hulle snork so verkliklik, daar was 'n sneeustorting die volgende oggend. In elk geval, toe dit lig genoeg was, het ons na hulle gegaan."

"Net so?" sê Ron verstom. "Julle het net so by die reuse se kamp ingeloop?"

"Dompeldorius het gesê hoe ons moet maak. Gee vir die Gurg geskenke, betoon respek."

"Gee vir die wat geskenke?" vra Harry.

"O, die Gurg – dis die hoofman."

"Hoe't julle geweet watter een is die Gurg?" vra Ron.

Hagrid snork geamuseerd.

"Maklik. Hy's die grootste, die lelikste en die luiste. Sit net daar en wag dat die ander vir hom kos aandra. Dooie bokke en sulke goed. Sy naam is Karkus. Ek skat hy was net so onder die sewe meter en weeg soveel soos 'n paar bulolifante. Vel soos 'n renoster en alles."

"En julle het net so na hom toe geloop?" sê Hermien uitasem.

"Wel, af na hom toe waar hy in die vallei gelê het. Hulle was in hierdie holte tussen vier hengse groot berge, langs 'n meer, en Karkus het by die meer gelê en vir die ander gebrul om vir hom en sy vrou kos te bring. Olympe en ek het met die berg afgestap –"

"Maar het hulle julle nie probeer doodmaak toe hulle julle sien nie?" vra Ron ongelowig.

"Party het dit beslis oorweeg," sê Hagrid skouerophalend, "maar ons het gemaak soos Dompeldorius gesê het. Ons het ons geskenk hoog in die lug gehou en ons oë op die Gurg en die ander geignoreer. Dis wat ons gedoen het. En die res het doodstil geword en gekyk hoe ons verbystap tot ons by Karkus se voete was en toe't ons gebuig en ons present voor hom neergesit."

"Wat gee 'n mens vir 'n reus?" vra Ron nuuskierig. "Kos?"

"Nee, hy kan self kos kry. Ons het vir hom toorgoed geneem. Reuse hou van toor, hulle hou net nie daarvan as ons dit teen hulle gebruik nie. In elk geval, daardie eerste dag het ons vir hom 'n tak Gubraitiaanse vuur gegee."

“Sjoe!” sê Hermien sag, maar Harry en Ron frons verward.

“’n Tak watsegoed?”

“Ewigdurende vuur,” sê Hermien ergerlik, “julle behoort dit teen hierdie tyd te weet. Professor Flickerpitt het dit al twee keer in sy klas genoem!”

“In elk geval,” sê Hagrid vinnig voor Ron kan terugkap, “Dompeldorius het die tak getoor sodat dit vir altyd brand en dis nie iets wat enige towenaar kan doen nie. Ek het dit in die sneeu voor Karkus se voete neergesit en gesê: ‘’n Geskenk vir die Gurg van die reuse van Albus Dompeldorius, wat sy respekvolle groete stuur.’”

“En wat het Karkus gesê?” vra Harry gretig.

“Niks,” sê Hagrid. “Hy praat nie ons taal nie.”

“Jy jok!”

“Dit was nie ’n probleem nie,” sê Hagrid onverstoord. “Dompeldorius het ons gewaarsku. Maar Karkus het genoeg verstaan om ’n paar reuse te roep wat ons taal praat en hulle het vir hom vertaal.”

“En het hy van die present gehou?” vra Ron.

“O, hulle was mal daaroor toe hulle eers verstaan wat dit is.” Hagrid draai die stuk draakvleis om en druk die kouer kant teen sy opgeswelde oog. “In sy noppies. En toe sê ek: ‘Albus Dompeldorius vra of die Gurg met sy boodskapper sal praat wanneer hy môre terugkom met nog ’n present.’”

“Hoekom het jy nie sommer toe met hom gepraat nie?” vra Hermien.

“Dompeldorius het gesê ons moet dit stadig vat. Laat hulle sien ons hou ons belofte. As ons sê ons gaan die volgende dag terugkom met nog ’n geskenk en ons gaan terug met nog ’n geskenk – dit sal ’n goeie indruk maak, sien. En hom tyd gee om die eerste present te toets en te sien of dit werk en lus te word vir nog een. In elk geval, reuse soos Karkus – gee hulle te veel inligting op een slag en hulle maak jou sommer net daar dood, net om dinge eenvoudiger te maak. Toe gaan ons buig-buig weg en gaan soek vir ons ’n lekker grot vir die nag en die volgende dag gaan ons terug en daar sit Karkus regop en wag vir ons en hy lyk baie gretig.”

“En het julle met hom gepraat?” vra Ron.

“O ja, ons het eers vir hom ’n baie oulike gevegshelmet gegee – gemaak deur gnome en onvernietigbaar, weet julle – en toe’t ons gaan sit en gesels.”

“Wat het hy gesê?”

“Nie veel nie, hy’t die meeste van die tyd geluister. Maar daar was ’n paar goeie tekens. Hy het al van Dompeldorius gehoor, hy’t gehoor dat Dompeldorius dit teengestaan het dat die laaste reuse in

Brittanje uitgewis word. Karkus wou dus baie graag hoor wat Dompeldorius te sê het en 'n paar van die ander, veral dié wat ons taal kan praat, het ook kom luister. Ons was vol moed toe ons daar weg is. Ons het belowe om die volgende dag terug te kom met nog 'n present.

“Maar daardie nag is alles opgemors.”

“Hoe so?” vra Ron vinnig.

“Wel, soos ek gesê het, reuse is nie gemaak om saam te woon nie,” sê Hagrid bedruk. “Nie in sulke groot groepe nie. Hulle kan dit nie help nie, hulle slaan mekaar elke nou en dan amper dood. Die mans baklei met mekaar en die vrouens baklei met mekaar en die oorblyfsels van die ou stamme baklei met mekaar, en dis nog sonder die bakleiery oor kos en die beste vure en slaapplekke. Jy sal dink hulle sal mekaar uitlos aangesien hulle hele ras so te sê uitgewis is, maar . . .”

Hagrid sug diep.

“Daardie nag het 'n groot bakleiery uitgebreek. Ons het dit van die bek van ons grot wat oor die vallei uitkyk, gesien. Hulle het ure lank aangehou en dit was 'n verskriklike kabaal. En toe die son opkom, toe is die sneeu bloedrooi en sy kop lê onderin die meer.”

“Wie se kop?” Hermien snak na asem.

“Karkus s'n,” sê Hagrid swaar. “Daar was 'n nuwe Gurg, Golgomat.” Hy sug diep. “Wel, ons het nie gedink daar gaan twee dae nadat ons met die eerste een kontak gemaak het al weer 'n nuwe Gurg wees nie. En ons het 'n snaakse gevoel gehad dat Golgomat nie lus sou wees om na ons te luister nie, maar ons moes probeer.”

“Julle het met hom gaan praat?” vra Ron ongelowig. “Nadat julle gesien het hoe hy die ander ou se kop afskeur?”

“Natuurlik! Ons het nie daardie hele ent pad gereis net om ná twee dae moed op te gee nie! Ons het die volgende present wat ons vir Karkus wou gee, saamgevat.

“Ek het geweet dit gaan nie werk nie nog voor ek my mond oopgemaak het. Hy't daar gesit met Karkus se helmet op sy kop en na ons gegluur terwyl ons nader stap. Hy is massief, een van die ou heel grótes. Swart hare en tande en 'n halssnoer van bene. Mensbene, party van hulle. Wel, ek het probeer. Ek het 'n groot rol draakvel uitgehou en gesê: 'n Present vir die Gurg van die reuse –’ Die volgende oomblik hang ek onderstebo aan my enkels. Twee van sy manne het my gegryp.”

Hermien klap haar hand oor haar mond.

“Wat maak jy toe?” snak Harry.

“As dit nie vir Olympe was nie, was dit klaar met kees. Sy't haar

towerstaf uitgepluk en van die vinnigste toorwerk gedoen wat ek nog gesien het. Ongelooflik. Het die twee in die gesig getref met die Pienkoogvloek. Hulle het my dadelik gelos, maar toe is ons vir jou in die pekel, want ons het toorkrag teen hulle gebruik en dis wat reuse van towenaars haat. Ons moes ons blitsig uit die voete maak en ons het geweet ons kon nie weer teruggaan nie."

"Jislaaik, Hagrid," sê Ron stilweg.

"Maar hoekom het dit so lank gevat om terug te kom as julle net vir drie dae daar was?" vra Hermien.

"Ons het nie ná drie dae weggegaan nie!" sê Hagrid geskok. "Dompeldorius het staatgemaak op ons!"

"Maar jy't nou net gesê julle kon nie weer teruggaan nie."

"Nie in die daglig nie. Ons moes weer dink. Het 'n paar dae daar in die grot gebly en gekyk wat aangaan. En wat ons gesien het, was nie goed nie."

"Het hy nog koppe afgeskeur?" Hermien klink of sy gril.

"Nee," sê Hagrid, "ek wens hy het."

"Wat bedoel jy?"

"Ek bedoel ons het gou agtergekom dat hy wel van sommige towenaars hou – net nie van ons nie."

"Doodseters?" vra Harry vinnig.

"Jip," sê Hagrid somber. "Paar van hulle was elke dag daar met geskenke vir die Gurg en hy't hulle nie kop onderstebo laat hang nie."

"Hoe weet jy hulle was Doodseters?" vra Ron.

"Omdat ek een van hulle herken het," grom Hagrid. "Macnair, onthou julle hom? Vent wat gestuur is om Bokbok dood te maak? Maniak, dis wat hy is. Hou net so baie van moor soos Golgomat, g'n wonder hulle is dik pëlle nie."

"Dan het Macnair die reuse oorreed om vir Jy-Weet-Wie te help?" vra Hermien wanhopig.

"Hou die Hippogriewe! Ek is nog glad nie klaar met my storie nie!" sê Hagrid verontwaardig. "Vir iemand wat eers niks wou sê nie, lyk dit of hy die vertellery nou besonder baie geniet."

"Ek en Olympe het dit bespreek en ons het gedink dat net omdat die Gurg vir Jy-Weet-Wie is, dit nie beteken dat al die ander ook vir hom is nie. Ons moes probeer om van die ander aan ons kant te kry, dié wat nie vir Golgomat as Gurg wou hê nie."

"Hoe het julle geweet wie hulle is?" vra Ron.

"Hulle was die ouens wat papgemoker is," sê Hagrid geduldig. "Dié met 'n bietjie verstand het uit Golgomat se pad gebly en soos ons in die grotte om die vallei weggekrui. Ons het besluit om snags

by die grotte rond te sluip en te kyk of ons 'n paar van hulle kan oortuig."

"Jule het in die donker tussen grotte rondgesluip op soek na reuse," sê Ron met skok en respek in sy stem.

"Wel, ons was nie so danig bekommerd oor die reuse nie," sê Hagrid. "Ons was meer bekommerd oor die Doodseters. Dompeldorius het vir ons gesê om nie met hulle te sukkel as ons dit kan verheip nie, maar die moeilikheid is dat hulle geweet het ons is daar

Golgomat het seker vir hulle gesê. Snags as die reuse geslaap en ons tussen die grotte rondgesluip het, het Macnair-hulle in die berge na ons gesoek. Ek moes 'n slag net lelik keer of Olympe het hulle bevlieg." Hagrid se mondhoëke lig sy woeste bos baard. "Sy wou hulle net toetakesel, sy's erg as sy kwaad is, daardie Olympe . . . vurig, weet julle . . . dis seker oor sy Frans is . . ."

Hagrid kyk met mistige oë na die vuur. Harry gee hom dertig sekondes om terug te dink voor hy sy keel hard skoonmaak.

"Wat het toe gebeur? Kon julle naby enige van die ander reuse kom?"

"Wat? O . . . o ja, ons kon. Ja, op die derde aand ná Karkus se dood het ons uit die grot gekruip en weer na die vallei gegaan, natuurlik die hele tyd op die uitkyk vir Doodseters. Het by 'n paar grotte ingegaan – toe, in omtrent die sesde een, kry ons drie reuse wat daar wegkruip."

"Die grot moet omtrent vol gewees het," sê Ron.

"Jy kon nie 'n knesel daarin swaai nie," sê Hagrid.

"Het hulle julle nie aangeval toe hulle julle sien nie?" vra Hermien.

"Hulle sou seker as hulle kon, maar al drie was lelik gewond. Golgomat se makkers het hulle bewusteloos geslaan. Toe hulle wakker word, het hulle na die naaste skuilplek gekruip. In elk geval, die een kon darem so min of meer vir die res vertaal en hulle het nogal gehou van wat ons gesê het. Ons het bly teruggaan na die gewondes . . . ons het in 'n stadium seker ses of sewe van hulle oortuig."

"Ses of sewe?" sê Ron gretig. "Dis nie sleg nie – gaan hulle oorloop en saam met ons teen Jy-Weet-Wie veg?"

Maar Hermien sê: "Wat bedoel jy met 'in 'n stadium'?"

Hagrid kyk bedroef na haar.

"Golgomat se spul het die grotte aangeval. Die ouens wat dit oorleef het, wou daarna niks meer met ons te doen hê nie."

"Dus . . . dus kom die reuse nie?" Ron lyk baie teleurgesteld.

"Nee," sê Hagrid en sug diep terwyl hy die stuk vleis omdraai sodat die koeler deel weer teen sy gesig is. "Maar ons het ons opdrag

uitgevoer en Dompeldorius se boodskap vir hulle gegee en party van hulle het dit gehoor en ek hoop net hulle onthou dit. Dalk sal die spul wat teen Golgomat is uit die berg trek en daar's 'n kans dat hulle sal onthou Dompeldorius was vriendelik met hulle. . . dalk kom hulle nog."

Buite lê die sneeu al vensterhoogte. Harry kom skielik agter dat sy kleeed se knieë deurnat is. Tande sit met sy kop op Harry se skoot en kwyl:

"Hagrid?" sê Hermien ná 'n rukkie.

"Hm?"

"Het jy . . . was daar enige teken van . . . het jy iets gehoor van jou . . . ma toe jy daar was?"

Hagrid se gesonde oog rus op haar en Hermien lyk effens bang.

"Ek is jammer . . . ek . . . vergeet dit –"

"Dood," grom Hagrid. "Jare gelede. Hulle het my vertel."

"O . . . ek . . . ek is baie jammer," sê Hermien in 'n klein stemmetjie.

Hagrid skud sy groot skouers. "Maak nie saak nie," sê hy kortaf. "Ek onthou haar nie juis nie. Was nie 'n wafferse ma nie."

Hulle is weer stil. Hermien loer senuagtig na Harry en Ron asof sy wil hê hulle moet iets sê.

"Maar jy't nog steeds nie verduidelik hoe jy in so 'n toestand beland het nie," sê Ron en wys na Hagrid se bloedbevlekte gesig.

"Of hoekom jy so laat teruggekom het nie," sê Harry. "Sirius sê Madame Maxime is al lankal terug –"

"Wie't jou aangeval?" vra Ron.

"Ek is nie aangeval nie!" sê Hagrid nadruklik. "Ek –"

Maar die res van sy woorde word uitgedoof deur 'n dawerende geklop aan die deur. Hermien snak na asem, haar beker glip uit haar vingers en val op die vloer. Tande tjank. Al vier staar na die venster langs die deur. Die skaduwee van iemand wat kort en dik is, is deur die dun gordyn sigbaar.

"Dis sy!" fluister Ron.

"Kom hier, gou!" sê Harry en gooi die onsigbaarheidsmantel oor hom en Hermien terwyl Ron om die tafel storm en ook onder die mantel inkruip. Hulle kruip na 'n hoek van die hut. Tande blaf soos 'n besetene en Hagrid lyk heeltemal verward.

"Hagrid, steek ons bekere weg!"

Hagrid gryp Harry en Ron se bekere en druk hulle onder die kussing in Tande se mandjie in. Tande spring op teen die deur en Hagrid stoot hom met sy voet uit die pad om dit oop te maak.

Professor Umbridge staan in die deur. Sy het haar groen tweed-

mantel en 'n bypassende hoed met oorklappe aan. Sy kom skaars tot by Hagrid se naeltjie. Haar lippe is styf opmekaar gepers en sy kantel haar kop ver agteroor en kyk op in sy gesig.

"So . . . jy is Hagrid, nè?" sê sy stadig en hard asof sy met iemand wat doof is, praat.

Sy stap in sonder om op 'n antwoord te wag en haar uitpeuloë skeer deur die vertrek.

"Gee pad," snou sy en waai haar handsak na Tande, wat nader gestorm het en probeer om haar gesig te lek.

"Hm – ek wil nie onbeskof of iets wees nie," sê Hagrid en staar na haar, "maar wie de dinges is jy?"

"My naam is Dolores Umbridge."

Haar oë speel nog steeds deur die hut en sy kyk twee keer stip na die hoek waar Harry tussen Ron en Hermien staan.

"Dolores Umbridge?" Hagrid lyk nog meer verward. "Ek dag jy's by die Ministerie – werk jy nie vir Broddelwerk nie?"

"Ek was ondersekretaris vir die Minister, ja," sê Umbridge, wat nou in die hut rondstap en na alles kyk, van die knapsak teen die muur tot die reismantel wat eenkant hang. "Ek is nou die onderwyser vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste –"

"Dis dapper van jou, daar's nie baie wat daarvoor kans sien nie."

"– en Högwarts se Hoë Ondersoeker," sê Umbridge sonder om 'n teken te gee dat sy hom gehoor het.

"Wat's dit?" vra Hagrid fronsend.

"Presies wat ek vir jou wil vra," sê Umbridge en wys na die stukke van Hermien se beker op die vloer.

"O," sê Hagrid en loer na die hoek waar Harry, Ron en Hermien staan, "o, dis . . . dis Tande. Hy't 'n beker gebreek. Toe moes ek hierdie een gebruik."

Hy wys na die beker waaruit hy gedrink het, een hand nog steeds oor die homp draakvleis teen sy oog. Umbridge staan nou voor hom en bekyk hom van kop tot tone.

"Ek het stemme gehoor," sê sy bedaard.

"Ek het met Tande gepraat," sê Hagrid dadelik.

"En hy praat terug?"

"Wel . . . op 'n manier," sê Hagrid en lyk ongemaklik. "Ek sê baie keer Tande is net so goed soos 'n mens –"

"Daar is drie stelle voetspore in die sneeu van die kasteel af hierheen," sê Umbridge gladweg.

Hermien snak na asem en Harry klap sy hand oor haar mond. Gelukkig is Tande besig om snorkend aan Umbridge se soom te snuif en dit lyk nie of sy iets gehoor het nie.

“Wel, ek het nou net teruggekom,” sê Hagrid en wys met sy enorme hand na die knapsak. “Dalk het iemand vroeër hierheen gekom om te kom kuier.”

“Daar is geen voetspore van jou hut af terug kasteel toe nie.”

“Wel . . . ek weet nie wat dit . . .” Hagrid trek benoud aan sy baard en loer weer na die hoek waar Harry, Ron en Hermien staan, asof hy hulp soek. “Hm . . .”

Umbridge swaai om en stap weer deur die hut terwyl sy oral goed kyk. Sy buk en loer onder die bed in. Sy maak Hagrid se kasteel oop. Sy stap rakelings verby Harry, Ron en Hermien, wat styf teen die muur staan. Harry trek selfs sy maag in.

Nadat Umbridge versigtig in Hagrid se enorme hekseketel gekyk het, waarin Hagrid kos maak, swaai sy om en sê: “Wat het met jou gebeur? Hoe is jy so beseer?”

Hagrid haal die draakvleis vinnig van sy gesig af. Wat Harry betref, was dit ’n fout. Die swart en pers kneusplekke is nou duidelik sigbaar, om nie te praat van die vars én gestolde bloed op Hagrid se gesig nie. “O, ek . . . ek het ’n ongelukkie gehad.”

“Watter soort ongeluk?”

“Ek het gestruikel.”

“Jy het gestruikel?” sê Umbridge kil.

“Ja, dis reg. Oor ’n vriend se besemstok. Ek vlieg nie self nie. Te groot. Ek dink nie daar’s ’n besem wat my gewig kan dra nie. Vriend van my teel Abraxan-perde, ek weet nie of jy al een gesien het nie, hulle is groot en het vlerke, weet jy. Ek het al op een gery en dit was –”

“Waar was jy?” vra Umbridge koud en onderbreek Hagrid se gebabbel.

“Waar was ek?”

“Ja. Die kwartaal het twee maande gelede begin. ’n Ander onderwyser neem vir jou waar. Nie een van jou kollegas kon my sê waar jy is nie en jy het geen adres gelaat nie. Waar was jy?”

Daar is ’n stilte waarin Hagrid uit sy geswelde oog na haar staar. Harry kan amper hoor hoe hard hy dink.

“Ek – ek was weg om gesondheidsredes.”

“Om gesondheidsredes,” herhaal professor Umbridge. Haar oë dwaal oor Hagrid se verkleurde, opgeswelde gesig. Drakebloed drup saggies op sy onderbaadjie. “Ek sien.”

“Ja,” sê Hagrid, “’n bietjie vars lug, weet jy –”

“Ja, as boswagter moet dit moeilik wees om genoeg vars lug te kry,” sê Umbridge soet. Die klein gedeelte van Hagrid se gesig wat nie swart of pers is nie, word rooi.

“Wel – verandering van omgewing, weet jy –”

“Bergagtige omgewing?” vra Umbridge vinnig.

Sy weet, dink Harry desperaat.

“Berge?” herhaal Hagrid en dis duidelik dat hy vinnig dink. “Nee, die suide van Frankryk vir my. Bietjie son en . . . en see.”

“Sowaar? Jy’t nie juis ’n brons kleur nie.”

“Ja . . . wel . . . sensitiewe vel,” sê Hagrid en probeer om minnend te glimlag. Harry sien dat twee van sy tande uitgeslaan is. Umbridge kyk kil na hom en sy glimlag verdwyn. Toe haak sy haar handsak ’n bietjie hoër in die buig van haar arm en sê: “Ek sal natuurlik vir die Ministerie laat weet dat jy uiteindelik terug is.”

“Goed,” sê Hagrid en knik.

“Jy behoort ook te weet dat dit as Hoë Ondersoeker ongelukkig my plig is om my medeonderwysers te inspekteer. Ons sal binnekort weer ontmoet.”

Sy draai vinnig om en stap deur toe.

“Jy inspekteer ons?” Hagrid staar verdwaas na haar.

“O ja,” sê Umbridge sag. Sy kyk terug na hom, haar hand op die deurhandvatsel. “Die Ministerie is vasberade om van alle onbekwame onderwysers ontslae te raak, Hagrid. Goeienag.”

Sy stap uit en trek die deur hard agter haar toe. Harry wil die onsigbaarheidsmantel afgooi, maar Hermien hou sy gewrig vas.

“Nie nou al nie,” sis sy in sy oor. “Sy’s dalk nog nie weg nie.”

Dit lyk of Hagrid ook so dink, want hy stap deur die vertrek en trek die gordyn effens opsy.

“Sy stap terug kasteel toe,” sê hy gedemp. “Jislaaik, so sy inspekteer mense, hè?”

“Ja,” sê Harry en haal die mantel af. “Trelawney is reeds op proef . . .”

“Hm . . . wat beplan jy om vanjaar met ons te doen, Hagrid?” vra Hermien.

“O, moenie daaroor worrie nie, ek het wonderlike lesse beplan,” sê Hagrid entoesiasties. Hy tel die draakvleis op en plak dit weer op sy oog. “Ek het ’n paar diere vir julle UIL-jaar gelos, julle sal sien, hulle is regtig iets besonder.”

“Hm . . . besonders op watter manier?” vra Hermien huiwerig.

“Ek sê niks,” sê Hagrid in sy noppies. “Ek wil nie die verrassing bederf nie.”

“Luister, Hagrid,” sê Hermien pront. “Professor Umbridge gaan glad nie daarvan hou as jy iets klas toe bring wat gevaarlik is nie.”

“Gevaarlik?” Hagrid lyk opreg verbaas. “Moenie laf wees nie. Ek

sal nie vir julle iets wys wat gevaarlik is nie. Ek meen, oukei, hulle kan hulleself verdedig, maar – ”

“Hagrid, om Umbridge se inspeksie te slaag, sal dit baie beter wees as jy vir ons leer hoe om porlokke te versorg en wat die verskil tussen knarle en krimpvarkies is, sulke goed,” sê Hermien ernstig.

“Maar dis nie baie interessant nie, Hermien! Die goed wat ek het, is baie beter. Ek maak hulle al jare lank groot. Ek dink ek het die enigste makgemaakte kudde in – ”

“Hagrid asseblief ” Hermien klink werklik radeloos. “Umbridge soek ’n rede om onderwysers uit te skop wat sy dink vir Dompeldorius steun. Asseblief, Hagrid, leer liewer vir ons iets verveligs wat ook in die UILE is.”

Maar Hagrid gaap groot en kyk verlangend deur een oog na sy enorme bed in die hoek van die hut.

“Luister, dit was ’n lang dag en dis laat,” sê hy en klop Hermien liggies op die skouer sodat haar knieë onder haar knak en sy op die vloer kniel. “O – jammer – ” Hy vat die agterkant van haar kleed en trek haar orent. “Luister, julle moenie oor my worrie nie. Ek belowe ek het goeie goed beplan vir julle lesse. Julle moet nou teruggaan kasteel toe en moenie vergeet om julle spore agter julle dood te vee nie!”

“Ek dink nie jy’t tot hom deurgedring nie,” sê Ron toe hulle deur die dik sneeu terugstap kasteel toe nadat hulle eers seker gemaak het alles is veilig. Hermien gebruik die hele ent pad ’n Uitwisspreuk om hulle spore uit te wis.

“Dan gaan ek môre terug,” sê Hermien vasberade. “Ek sal sy lesse vir hom beplan as ek moet. Ek gee nie om as sy vir Trelawney uit-skop nie, maar sy gaan nie van Hagrid ontslae raak nie!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



THE EYE OF THE SNAKE

Hermione plowed her way back to Hagrid's cabin through two feet of snow on Sunday morning. Harry and Ron wanted to go with her, but their mountain of homework had reached an alarming height again, so they grudgingly remained in the common room, trying to ignore the gleeful shouts drifting up from the grounds outside, where students were enjoying themselves skating on the frozen lake, tobogganing, and worst of all, bewitching snowballs to zoom up to Gryffindor Tower and rap hard on the windows.

"Oy!" bellowed Ron, finally losing patience and sticking his head out of the window. "I am a prefect and if one more snowball hits this window — OUCH!"

He withdrew his head sharply, his face covered in snow.

"It's Fred and George," he said bitterly, slamming the window behind him. "Gits . . ."

Hermione returned from Hagrid's just before lunch, shivering slightly, her robes damp to the knees.

"So?" said Ron, looking up when she entered. "Got all his lessons planned for him?"

"Well, I tried," she said dully, sinking into a chair beside Harry. She pulled out her wand and gave it a complicated little wave so that hot air streamed out of the tip; she then pointed this at her robes, which began to steam as they dried out. "He wasn't even there when I arrived, I was knocking for at least half an hour. And then he came stumping out of the forest —"

Harry groaned. The Forbidden Forest was teeming with the kind of creatures most likely to get Hagrid the sack. "What's he keeping in there? Did he say?" asked Harry.

"No," said Hermione miserably. "He says he wants them to be a surprise. I tried to explain about Umbridge, but he just doesn't get it. He kept saying nobody in their right mind would rather study knarls than chimaeras — oh I don't think he's *got* a chimaera," she added at the appalled look on Harry and Ron's faces, "but that's not for lack of trying from what he said about how hard it is to get eggs. . . . I don't know how many times I told him he'd be better off following Grubbly-Plank's plan, I honestly don't think he listened to half of what I said. He's in a bit of a funny mood, you know. He still won't say how he got all those injuries . . ."

Hagrid's reappearance at the staff table at breakfast next day was

not greeted by enthusiasm from all students. Some, like Fred, George, and Lee, roared with delight and sprinted up the aisle between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables to wring Hagrid's enormous hand; others, like Parvati and Lavender, exchanged gloomy looks and shook their heads. Harry knew that many of them preferred Professor Grubbly-Plank's lessons, and the worst of it was that a very small, unbiased part of him knew that they had good reason. Grubbly-Plank's idea of an interesting class was not one where there was a risk that somebody might have their head ripped off.

It was with a certain amount of apprehension that Harry, Ron, and Hermione headed down to Hagrid's on Tuesday, heavily muffled against the cold. Harry was worried, not only about what Hagrid might have decided to teach them, but also about how the rest of the class, particularly Malfoy and his cronies, would behave if Umbridge was watching them.

However, the High Inquisitor was nowhere to be seen as they struggled through the snow toward Hagrid, who stood waiting for them on the edge of the forest. He did not present a reassuring sight; the bruises that had been purple on Saturday night were now tinged with green and yellow and some of his cuts still seemed to be bleeding. Harry could not understand this. Had Hagrid perhaps been attacked by some creature whose venom prevented the wounds it inflicted from healing? As though to complete the ominous picture, Hagrid was carrying what looked like half a dead cow over his shoulder.

"We're workin' in here today!" Hagrid called happily to the approaching students, jerking his head back at the dark trees behind

him. "Bit more sheltered! Anyway, they prefer the dark..."

"What prefers the dark?" Harry heard Malfoy say sharply to Crabbe and Goyle, a trace of panic in his voice. "What did he say prefers the dark — did you hear?"

Harry remembered the only occasion on which Malfoy had entered the forest before now; he had not been very brave then either. He smiled to himself; after the Quidditch match anything that caused Malfoy discomfort was all right with him.

"Ready?" said Hagrid happily, looking around at the class. "Right, well, I've bin savin' a trip inter the forest fer yer fifth year. Thought we'd go an' see these creatures in their natural habitat. Now, what we're studyin' today is pretty rare, I reckon I'm probably the on'y person in Britain who's managed ter train 'em —"

"And you're sure they're trained, are you?" said Malfoy, the panic in his voice even more pronounced now. "Only it wouldn't be the first time you'd brought wild stuff to class, would it?"

The Slytherins murmured agreement and a few Gryffindors looked as though they thought Malfoy had a fair point too.

"Course they're trained," said Hagrid, scowling and hoisting the dead cow a little higher on his shoulder.

"So what happened to your face, then?" demanded Malfoy.

"Mind yer own business!" said Hagrid, angrily. "Now if yeh've finished askin' stupid questions, follow me!"

He turned and strode straight into the forest. Nobody seemed much disposed to follow. Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione, who sighed but nodded, and the three of them set off after Hagrid, leading the rest of the class.

They walked for about ten minutes until they reached a place where the trees stood so closely together that it was as dark as twilight and there was no snow on the ground at all. Hagrid deposited his half a cow with a grunt on the ground, stepped back, and turned to face his class again, most of whom were creeping toward him from tree to tree, peering around nervously as though expecting to be set upon at any moment.

“Gather roun’, gather roun’,” said Hagrid encouragingly. “Now, they’ll be attracted by the smell o’ the meat but I’m goin’ ter give ’em a call anyway, ’cause they’ll like ter know it’s me . . .”

He turned, shook his shaggy head to get the hair out of his face, and gave an odd, shrieking cry that echoed through the dark trees like the call of some monstrous bird. Nobody laughed; most of them looked too scared to make a sound.

Hagrid gave the shrieking cry again. A minute passed in which the class continued to peer nervously over their shoulders and around trees for a first glimpse of whatever it was that was coming. And then, as Hagrid shook his hair back for a third time and expanded his enormous chest, Harry nudged Ron and pointed into the black space between two gnarled yew trees.

A pair of blank, white, shining eyes were growing larger through the gloom and a moment later the dragonish face, neck, and then skeletal body of a great, black, winged horse emerged from the darkness. It looked around at the class for a few seconds, swishing its long black tail, then bowed its head and began to tear flesh from the dead cow with its pointed fangs.

A great wave of relief broke over Harry. Here at last was proof

that he had not imagined these creatures, that they were real. Hagrid knew about them too. He looked eagerly at Ron, but Ron was still staring around into the trees and after a few seconds he whispered, "Why doesn't Hagrid call again?"

Most of the rest of the class were wearing expressions as confused and nervously expectant as Ron's and were still gazing everywhere but at the horse standing feet from them. There were only two other people who seemed to be able to see them: a stringy Slytherin boy standing just behind Goyle was watching the horse eating with an expression of great distaste on his face, and Neville, whose eyes were following the swishing progress of the long black tail.

"Oh, an' here comes another one!" said Hagrid proudly, as a second black horse appeared out of the dark trees, folded its leathery wings closer to its body, and dipped its head to gorge on the meat. "Now . . . put yer hands up, who can see 'em?"

Immensely pleased to feel that he was at last going to understand the mystery of these horses, Harry raised his hand. Hagrid nodded at him.

"Yeah . . . yeah, I knew you'd be able ter, Harry," he said seriously. "An' you too, Neville, eh? An' —"

"Excuse me," said Malfoy in a sneering voice, "but what exactly are we supposed to be seeing?"

For answer, Hagrid pointed at the cow carcass on the ground. The whole class stared at it for a few seconds, then several people gasped and Parvati squealed. Harry understood why. Bits of flesh stripping themselves away from the bones and vanishing into thin air had to look very odd indeed.

“What’s doing it?” Parvati demanded in a terrified voice, retreating behind the nearest tree. “What’s eating it?”

“Thestrals,” said Hagrid proudly and Hermione gave a soft “oh!” of comprehension at Harry’s shoulder. “Hogwarts has got a whole herd of ’em in here. Now, who knows — ?”

“But they’re really, really unlucky!” interrupted Parvati, looking alarmed. “They’re supposed to bring all sorts of horrible misfortune on people who see them. Professor Trelawney told me once —”

“No, no, no,” said Hagrid, chuckling, “tha’s jus’ superstition, that is, they aren’ unlucky, they’re dead clever an’ useful! ’Course, this lot don’ get a lot o’ work, it’s mainly jus’ pullin’ the school carriages unless Dumbledore’s takin’ a long journey an’ don’ want ter Apparate — an’ here’s another couple, look —”

Two more horses came quietly out of the trees, one of them passing very close to Parvati, who shivered and pressed herself closer to the tree, saying, “I think I felt something. I think it’s near me!”

“Don’ worry, it won’ hurt yeh,” said Hagrid patiently. “Righ’, now, who can tell me why some o’ you can see them an’ some can’t?”

Hermione raised her hand.

“Go on then,” said Hagrid, beaming at her.

“The only people who can see thestrals,” she said, “are people who have seen death.”

“Tha’s exactly right,” said Hagrid solemnly, “ten points ter Gryffindor. Now, thestrals —”

“Hem, hem.”

Professor Umbridge had arrived. She was standing a few feet away from Harry, wearing her green hat and cloak again, her

clipboard at the ready. Hagrid, who had never heard Umbridge's fake cough before, was gazing in some concern at the closest thestral, evidently under the impression that it had made the sound.

"*Hem, hem.*"

"Oh hello!" Hagrid said, smiling, having located the source of the noise.

"You received the note I sent to your cabin this morning?" said Umbridge, in the same loud, slow voice she had used with him earlier, as though she was addressing somebody both foreign and very slow. "Telling you that I would be inspecting your lesson?"

"Oh yeah," said Hagrid brightly. "Glad yeh found the place all righ'! Well, as you can see — or, I dunno — can you? We're doin' thestrals today —"

"I'm sorry?" said Umbridge loudly, cupping her hand around her ear and frowning. "What did you say?"

Hagrid looked a little confused.

"Er — *thestrals!*" he said loudly. "Big — er — winged horses, yeh know!"

He flapped his gigantic arms hopefully. Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows at him and muttered as she made a note on her clipboard, "*has . . . to . . . resort . . . to . . . crude . . . sign . . . language . . .*"

"Well . . . anyway . . ." said Hagrid, turning back to the class and looking slightly flustered. "Erm . . . what was I sayin'?"

"*Appears . . . to . . . have . . . poor . . . short . . . term . . . memory . . .*" muttered Umbridge, loudly enough for everyone to hear her. Draco Malfoy looked as though Christmas had come a

month early; Hermione, on the other hand, had turned scarlet with suppressed rage.

“Oh yeah,” said Hagrid, throwing an uneasy glance at Umbridge’s clipboard, but plowing on valiantly. “Yeah, I was gonna tell yeh how come we got a herd. Yeah, so, we started off with a male an’ five females. This one,” he patted the first horse to have appeared, “name o’ Tenebrus, he’s my special favorite, firs’ one born here in the forest —”

“Are you aware,” Umbridge said loudly, interrupting him, “that the Ministry of Magic has classified thestrals as ‘dangerous’?”

Harry’s heart sank like a stone, but Hagrid merely chuckled.

“Thestrals aren’ dangerous! All righ’, they might take a bite outta you if yeh really annoy them —”

“*“Shows . . . signs . . . of . . . pleasure . . . at . . . idea . . . of . . . violence”*” muttered Umbridge, scribbling on her clipboard again.

“No — come on!” said Hagrid, looking a little anxious now. “I mean, a dog’ll bite if yeh bait it, won’ it — but thestrals have jus’ got a bad reputation because o’ the death thing — people used ter think they were bad omens, didn’ they? Jus’ didn’ understand, did they?”

Umbridge did not answer; she finished writing her last note, then looked up at Hagrid and said, again very loudly and slowly, “Please continue teaching as usual. I am going to walk” — she mimed walking — Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson were having silent fits of laughter — “among the students” — she pointed around at individual members of the class — “and ask them questions.” She pointed at her mouth to indicate talking.

Hagrid stared at her, clearly at a complete loss to understand why she was acting as though he did not understand normal English. Hermione had tears of fury in her eyes now.

“You hag, you evil hag!” she whispered, as Umbridge walked toward Pansy Parkinson. “I know what you’re doing, you awful, twisted, vicious —”

“Erm . . . anyway,” said Hagrid, clearly struggling to regain the flow of his lesson, “so — thestrals. Yeah. Well, there’s loads o’ good stuff abou’ them . . .”

“Do you find,” said Professor Umbridge in a ringing voice to Pansy Parkinson, “that you are able to understand Professor Hagrid when he talks?”

Just like Hermione, Pansy had tears in her eyes, but these were tears of laughter; indeed, her answer was almost incoherent because she was trying to suppress her giggles. “No . . . because . . . well . . . it sounds . . . like grunting a lot of the time . . .”

Umbridge scribbled on her clipboard. The few unbruised bits of Hagrid’s face flushed, but he tried to act as though he had not heard Pansy’s answer.

“Er . . . yeah . . . good stuff abou’ thestrals. Well, once they’re tamed, like this lot, yeh’ll never be lost again. ’Mazin’ senses o’ direction, jus’ tell ’em where yeh want ter go —”

“Assuming they can understand you, of course,” said Malfoy loudly, and Pansy Parkinson collapsed in a fit of renewed giggles. Professor Umbridge smiled indulgently at them and then turned to Neville.

“You can see the thestrals, Longbottom, can you?” she said.

Neville nodded.

“Whom did you see die?” she asked, her tone indifferent.

“My . . . my grandad,” said Neville.

“And what do you think of them?” she said, waving her stubby hand at the horses, who by now had stripped a great deal of the carcass down to bone.

“Erm,” said Neville nervously, with a glance at Hagrid. “Well, they’re . . . er . . . okay . . .”

“‘Students . . . are . . . too . . . intimidated . . . to . . . admit . . . they . . . are . . . frightened . . .’” muttered Umbridge, making another note on her clipboard.

“No!” said Neville, looking upset, “no, I’m not scared of them — !”

“It’s quite all right,” said Umbridge, patting Neville on the shoulder with what she evidently intended to be an understanding smile, though it looked more like a leer to Harry. “Well, Hagrid,” she turned to look up at him again, speaking once more in that loud, slow voice, “I think I’ve got enough to be getting along with . . . You will receive” — she mimed taking something from the air in front of her — “the results of your inspection” — she pointed at the clipboard — “in ten days’ time.” She held up ten stubby little fingers, then, her smile wider and more toadlike than ever before beneath her green hat, she bustled from their midst, leaving Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson in fits of laughter, Hermione actually shaking with fury, and Neville looking confused and upset.

“That foul, lying, twisting old gargoyle!” stormed Hermione half an hour later, as they made their way back up to the castle through the

channels they had made earlier in the snow. "You see what she's up to? It's her thing about half-breeds all over again — she's trying to make out Hagrid's some kind of dim-witted troll, just because he had a giantess for a mother — and oh, it's not fair, that really wasn't a bad lesson at all — I mean, all right, if it had been Blast-Ended Skrewts again, but thestrals are fine — in fact, for Hagrid, they're really good!"

"Umbridge said they're dangerous," said Ron.

"Well, it's like Hagrid said, they can look after themselves," said Hermione impatiently, "and I suppose a teacher like Grubbly-Plank wouldn't usually show them to us before N.E.W.T. level, but, well, they *are* very interesting, aren't they? The way some people can see them and some can't! I wish I could."

"Do you?" Harry asked her quietly.

She looked horrorstruck.

"Oh Harry — I'm sorry — no, of course I don't — that was a really stupid thing to say —"

"It's okay," he said quickly, "don't worry . . ."

"I'm surprised so many people *could* see them," said Ron. "Three in a class —"

"Yeah, Weasley, we were just wondering," said a malicious voice nearby. Unheard by any of them in the muffling snow, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were walking along right behind them. "D'you reckon if you saw someone snuff it you'd be able to see the Quaffle better?"

He, Crabbe, and Goyle roared with laughter as they pushed past on their way to the castle and then broke into a chorus of "Weasley Is

Our King.” Ron’s ears turned scarlet.

“Ignore them, just ignore them,” intoned Hermione, pulling out her wand and performing the charm to produce hot air again, so that she could melt them an easier path through the untouched snow between them and the greenhouses.

December arrived, bringing with it more snow and a positive avalanche of homework for the fifth years. Ron and Hermione’s prefect duties also became more and more onerous as Christmas approached. They were called upon to supervise the decoration of the castle (“You try putting up tinsel when Peeves has got the other end and is trying to strangle you with it,” said Ron), to watch over first and second years spending their break times inside because of the bitter cold (“And they’re cheeky little snotrags, you know, we definitely weren’t that rude when we were in first year,” said Ron), and to patrol the corridors in shifts with Argus Filch, who suspected that the holiday spirit might show itself in an outbreak of wizard duels (“He’s got dung for brains, that one,” said Ron furiously). They were so busy that Hermione had stopped knitting elf hats and was fretting that she was down to her last three.

“All those poor elves I haven’t set free yet, having to stay over during Christmas because there aren’t enough hats!”

Harry, who had not had the heart to tell her that Dobby was taking everything she made, bent lower over his History of Magic essay. In any case, he did not want to think about Christmas. For the first time in his school career, he very much wanted to spend the holidays away from Hogwarts. Between his Quidditch ban and worry about whether

or not Hagrid was going to be put on probation, he felt highly resentful toward the place at the moment. The only thing he really looked forward to were the D.A. meetings, and they would have to stop over the holidays, as nearly everybody in the D.A. would be spending the time with their families. Hermione was going skiing with her parents, something that greatly amused Ron, who had never before heard of Muggles strapping narrow strips of wood to their feet to slide down mountains. Ron, meanwhile, was going home to the Burrow. Harry endured several days of jealousy before Ron said, in response to Harry asking how Ron was going to get home for Christmas, "But you're coming too! Didn't I say? Mum wrote and told me to invite you weeks ago!"

Hermione rolled her eyes, but Harry's spirits soared: The thought of Christmas at the Burrow was truly wonderful, only slightly marred by Harry's guilty feeling that he would not be able to spend the holiday with Sirius. He wondered whether he could possibly persuade Mrs. Weasley to invite his godfather for the festivities too, but apart from the fact that he doubted whether Dumbledore would permit Sirius to leave Grimmauld Place, he could not help but feel that Mrs. Weasley might not want him; they were so often at loggerheads. Sirius had not contacted Harry at all since his last appearance in the fire, and although Harry knew that with Umbridge on the constant watch it would be unwise to attempt to contact him, he did not like to think of Sirius alone in his mother's old house, perhaps pulling a lonely cracker with Kreacher.

Harry arrived early in the Room of Requirement for the last D.A. meeting before the holidays and was very glad he had, because when

the lamps burst into light he saw that Dobby had taken it upon himself to decorate the place for Christmas. He could tell the elf had done it, because nobody else would have strung a hundred golden baubles from the ceiling, each showing a picture of Harry's face and bearing the legend HAVE A VERY HARRY CHRISTMAS!

Harry had only just managed to get the last of them down before the door creaked open and Luna Lovegood entered, looking dreamy as always.

"Hello," she said vaguely, looking around at what remained of the decorations. "These are nice, did you put them up?"

"No," said Harry, "it was Dobby the house-elf."

"Mistletoe," said Luna dreamily, pointing at a large clump of white berries placed almost over Harry's head. He jumped out from under it. "Good thinking," said Luna very seriously. "It's often infested with nargles."

Harry was saved the necessity of asking what nargles were by the arrival of Angelina, Katie, and Alicia. All three of them were breathless and looked very cold.

"Well," said Angelina dully, pulling off her cloak and throwing it into a corner, "we've replaced you."

"Replaced me?" said Harry blankly.

"You and Fred and George," she said impatiently. "We've got another Seeker!"

"Who?" said Harry quickly.

"Ginny Weasley," said Katie.

Harry gaped at her.

"Yeah, I know," said Angelina, pulling out her wand and flexing

her arm. "But she's pretty good, actually. Nothing on you, of course," she said, throwing him a very dirty look, "but as we can't have you . . ."

Harry bit back the retort he was longing to utter: Did she imagine for a second that he did not regret his expulsion from the team a hundred times more than she did?

"And what about the Beaters?" he asked, trying to keep his voice even.

"Andrew Kirke," said Alicia without enthusiasm, "and Jack Sloper. Neither of them are brilliant, but compared with the rest of the idiots who turned up . . ."

The arrival of Ron, Hermione, and Neville brought this depressing discussion to an end and within five minutes, the room was full enough to prevent him seeing Angelina's burning, reproachful looks.

"Okay," he said, calling them all to order. "I thought this evening we should just go over the things we've done so far, because it's the last meeting before the holidays and there's no point starting anything new right before a three-week break —"

"We're not doing anything new?" said Zacharias Smith, in a disgruntled whisper loud enough to carry through the room. "If I'd known that, I wouldn't have come . . ."

"We're all really sorry Harry didn't tell you, then," said Fred loudly.

Several people sniggered. Harry saw Cho laughing and felt the familiar swooping sensation in his stomach, as though he had missed a step going downstairs.

"We can practice in pairs," said Harry. "We'll start with the

Impediment Jinx, just for ten minutes, then we can get out the cushions and try Stunning again.”

They all divided up obediently; Harry partnered Neville as usual. The room was soon full of intermittent cries of “*Impedimenta!*” People froze for a minute or so, during which their partners would stare aimlessly around the room watching other pairs at work, then would unfreeze and take their turn at the jinx.

Neville had improved beyond all recognition. After a while, when Harry had unfrozen three times in a row, he had Neville join Ron and Hermione again so that he could walk around the room and watch the others. When he passed Cho she beamed at him; he resisted the temptation to walk past her several more times.

After ten minutes on the Impediment Jinx, they laid out cushions all over the floor and started practicing Stunning again. Space was really too confined to allow them all to work this spell at once; half the group observed the others for a while, then swapped over. Harry felt himself positively swelling with pride as he watched them all. True, Neville did Stun Padma Patil rather than Dean, at whom he had been aiming, but it was a much closer miss than usual, and everybody else had made enormous progress.

At the end of an hour, Harry called a halt.

“You’re getting really good,” he said, beaming around at them. “When we get back from the holidays we can start doing some of the big stuff — maybe even Patronuses.”

There was a murmur of excitement. The room began to clear in the usual twos and threes; most people wished Harry a Happy Christmas as they went. Feeling cheerful, he collected up the cushions with Ron

and Hermione and stacked them neatly away. Ron and Hermione left before he did; he hung back a little, because Cho was still there and he was hoping to receive a Merry Christmas from her.

“No, you go on,” he heard her say to her friend Marietta, and his heart gave a jolt that seemed to take it into the region of his Adam’s apple.

He pretended to be straightening the cushion pile. He was quite sure they were alone now and waited for her to speak. Instead, he heard a hearty sniff.

He turned and saw Cho standing in the middle of the room, tears pouring down her face.

“Wha — ?”

He didn’t know what to do. She was simply standing there, crying silently.

“What’s up?” he said feebly.

She shook her head and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “I’m — sorry,” she said thickly. “I suppose . . . it’s just . . . learning all this stuff . . . It just makes me . . . wonder whether . . . if *he’d* known it all . . . he’d still be alive . . .”

Harry’s heart sank right back past its usual spot and settled somewhere around his navel. He ought to have known. She wanted to talk about Cedric.

“He did know this stuff,” Harry said heavily. “He was really good at it, or he could never have got to the middle of that maze. But if Voldemort really wants to kill you, you don’t stand a chance.”

She hiccuped at the sound of Voldemort’s name, but stared at Harry without flinching.

"*You* survived when you were just a baby," she said quietly.

"Yeah, well," said Harry wearily, moving toward the door, "I dunno why, nor does anyone else, so it's nothing to be proud of."

"Oh don't go!" said Cho, sounding tearful again. "I'm really sorry to get all upset like this. . . . I didn't mean to . . ."

She hiccuped again. She was very pretty even when her eyes were red and puffy. Harry felt thoroughly miserable. He'd have been so pleased just with a Merry Christmas. . . .

"I know it must be horrible for you," she said, mopping her eyes on her sleeve again. "Me mentioning Cedric, when you saw him die. . . . I suppose you just want to forget about it. . . ."

Harry did not say anything to this; it was quite true, but he felt heartless saying it.

"You're a r-really good teacher, you know," said Cho, with a watery smile. "I've never been able to Stun anything before."

"Thanks," said Harry awkwardly.

They looked at each other for a long moment. Harry felt a burning desire to run from the room and, at the same time, a complete inability to move his feet.

"Mistletoe," said Cho quietly, pointing at the ceiling over his head.

"Yeah," said Harry. His mouth was very dry. "It's probably full of nargles, though."

"What are nargles?"

"No idea," said Harry. She had moved closer. His brain seemed to have been Stunned. "You'd have to ask Loony Luna, I mean."

Cho made a funny noise halfway between a sob and a laugh. She was even nearer him now. He could have counted the freckles on her

nose.

“I really like you, Harry.”

He could not think. A tingling sensation was spreading throughout him, paralyzing his arms, legs, and brain.

She was much too close. He could see every tear clinging to her eyelashes. . . .

He returned to the common room half an hour later to find Hermione and Ron in the best seats by the fire; nearly everybody else had gone to bed. Hermione was writing a very long letter; she had already filled half a roll of parchment, which was dangling from the edge of the table. Ron was lying on the hearthrug, trying to finish his Transfiguration homework.

“What kept you?” he asked, as Harry sank into the armchair next to Hermione’s.

Harry did not answer. He was in a state of shock. Half of him wanted to tell Ron and Hermione what had just happened, but the other half wanted to take the secret with him to the grave.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Hermione asked, peering at him over the tip of her quill.

Harry gave a halfhearted shrug. In truth, he didn’t know whether he was all right or not.

“What’s up?” said Ron, hoisting himself up on his elbow to get a clearer view of Harry. “What’s happened?”

Harry didn’t quite know how to set about telling them, and still wasn’t sure whether he wanted to. Just as he had decided not to say

anything, Hermione took matters out of his hands.

“Is it Cho?” she asked in a businesslike way. “Did she corner you after the meeting?”

Numbly surprised, Harry nodded. Ron sniggered, breaking off when Hermione caught his eye.

“So — er — what did she want?” he asked in a mock casual voice.

“She —” Harry began, rather hoarsely; he cleared his throat and tried again. “She — er —”

“Did you kiss?” asked Hermione briskly.

Ron sat up so fast that he sent his ink bottle flying all over the rug. Disregarding this completely he stared avidly at Harry.

“Well?” he demanded.

Harry looked from Ron’s expression of mingled curiosity and hilarity to Hermione’s slight frown, and nodded.

“HA!”

Ron made a triumphant gesture with his fist and went into a raucous peal of laughter that made several timid-looking second years over beside the window jump. A reluctant grin spread over Harry’s face as he watched Ron rolling around on the hearthrug. Hermione gave Ron a look of deep disgust and returned to her letter.

“Well?” Ron said finally, looking up at Harry. “How was it?”

Harry considered for a moment.

“Wet,” he said truthfully.

Ron made a noise that might have indicated jubilation or disgust, it was hard to tell.

"Because she was crying," Harry continued heavily.

"Oh," said Ron, his smile fading slightly. "Are you that bad at kissing?"

"Dunno," said Harry, who hadn't considered this, and immediately felt rather worried. "Maybe I am."

"Of course you're not," said Hermione absently, still scribbling away at her letter.

"How do you know?" said Ron in a sharp voice.

"Because Cho spends half her time crying these days," said Hermione vaguely. "She does it at mealtimes, in the loos, all over the place."

"You'd think a bit of kissing would cheer her up," said Ron, grinning.

"Ron," said Hermione in a dignified voice, dipping the point of her quill into her ink pot, "you are the most insensitive wart I have ever had the misfortune to meet."

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Ron indignantly. "What sort of person cries while someone's kissing them?"

"Yeah," said Harry, slightly desperately, "who does?"

Hermione looked at the pair of them with an almost pitying expression on her face.

"Don't you understand how Cho's feeling at the moment?" she asked.

"No," said Harry and Ron together.

Hermione sighed and laid down her quill.

"Well, obviously, she's feeling very sad, because of Cedric dying.

Then I expect she's feeling confused because she liked Cedric and now she likes Harry, and she can't work out who she likes best. Then she'll be feeling guilty, thinking it's an insult to Cedric's memory to be kissing Harry at all, and she'll be worrying about what everyone else might say about her if she starts going out with Harry. And she probably can't work out what her feelings toward Harry are anyway, because he was the one who was with Cedric when Cedric died, so that's all very mixed up and painful. Oh, and she's afraid she's going to be thrown off the Ravenclaw Quidditch team because she's been flying so badly."

A slightly stunned silence greeted the end of this speech, then Ron said, "One person can't feel all that at once, they'd explode."

"Just because you've got the emotional range of a teaspoon doesn't mean we all have," said Hermione nastily, picking up her quill again.

"She was the one who started it," said Harry. "I wouldn't've — she just sort of came at me — and next thing she's crying all over me — I didn't know what to do —"

"Don't blame you, mate," said Ron, looking alarmed at the very thought.

"You just had to be nice to her," said Hermione, looking up anxiously. "You were, weren't you?"

"Well," said Harry, an unpleasant heat creeping up his face, "I sort of — patted her on the back a bit."

Hermione looked as though she was restraining herself from rolling her eyes with extreme difficulty.

"Well, I suppose it could have been worse," she said. "Are you going to see her again?"

“I’ll have to, won’t I?” said Harry. “We’ve got D.A. meetings, haven’t we?”

“You know what I mean,” said Hermione impatiently.

Harry said nothing. Hermione’s words opened up a whole new vista of frightening possibilities. He tried to imagine going somewhere with Cho — Hogsmeade, perhaps — and being alone with her for hours at a time. Of course, she would have been expecting him to ask her out after what had just happened. . . . The thought made his stomach clench painfully.

“Oh well,” said Hermione distantly, buried in her letter once more, “you’ll have plenty of opportunities to ask her . . .”

“What if he doesn’t want to ask her?” said Ron, who had been watching Harry with an unusually shrewd expression on his face.

“Don’t be silly,” said Hermione vaguely, “Harry’s liked her for ages, haven’t you, Harry?”

He did not answer. Yes, he had liked Cho for ages, but whenever he had imagined a scene involving the two of them it had always featured a Cho who was enjoying herself, as opposed to a Cho who was sobbing uncontrollably into his shoulder.

“Who’re you writing the novel to anyway?” Ron asked Hermione, trying to read the bit of parchment now trailing on the floor. Hermione hitched it up out of sight.

“Viktor.”

“*Krum?*”

“How many other Viktors do we know?”

Ron said nothing, but looked disgruntled. They sat in silence for another twenty minutes, Ron finishing his Transfiguration essay with

many snorts of impatience and crossings-out, Hermione writing steadily to the very end of the parchment, rolling it up carefully and sealing it, and Harry staring into the fire, wishing more than anything that Sirius's head would appear there and give him some advice about girls. But the fire merely crackled lower and lower, until the red-hot embers crumbled into ash and, looking around, Harry saw that they were, yet again, the last in the common room.

"Well, 'night," said Hermione, yawning widely, and she set off up the girls' staircase.

"What does she see in Krum?" Ron demanded as he and Harry climbed the boys' stairs.

"Well," said Harry, considering the matter, "I s'pose he's older, isn't he . . . and he's an international Quidditch player . . ."

"Yeah, but apart from that," said Ron, sounding aggravated. "I mean he's a grouchy git, isn't he?"

"Bit grouchy, yeah," said Harry, whose thoughts were still on Cho. They pulled off their robes and put on pajamas in silence; Dean, Seamus, and Neville were already asleep. Harry put his glasses on his bedside table and got into bed but did not pull the hangings closed around his four-poster; instead he stared at the patch of starry sky visible through the window next to Neville's bed. If he had known, this time last night, that in twenty-four hours' time he would have kissed Cho Chang . . .

"Night," grunted Ron, from somewhere to his right.

"Night," said Harry.

Maybe next time . . . if there was a next time . . . she'd be a bit happier. He ought to have asked her out; she had probably been

expecting it and was now really angry with him . . . or was she lying in bed, still crying about Cedric? He did not know what to think. Hermione's explanation had made it all seem more complicated rather than easier to understand.

That's what they should teach us here, he thought, turning over onto his side, *how girls' brains work . . . it'd be more useful than Divination anyway. . . .*

Neville snuffled in his sleep. An owl hooted somewhere out in the night.

Harry dreamed he was back in the D.A. room. Cho was accusing him of luring her there under false pretenses; she said that he had promised her a hundred and fifty Chocolate Frog cards if she showed up. Harry protested. . . . Cho shouted, "*Cedric gave me loads of Chocolate Frog cards, look!*" And she pulled out fistfuls of cards from inside her robes and threw them into the air, and then turned into Hermione, who said, "*You did promise her, you know, Harry. . . . I think you'd better give her something else instead. . . . How about your Firebolt?*" And Harry was protesting that he could not give Cho his Firebolt because Umbridge had it, and anyway the whole thing was ridiculous, he'd only come to the D.A. room to put up some Christmas baubles shaped like Dobby's head. . . .

The dream changed. . . .

His body felt smooth, powerful, and flexible. He was gliding between shining metal bars, across dark, cold stone. . . . He was flat against the floor, sliding along on his belly. . . . It was dark, yet he could see objects around him shimmering in strange, vibrant colors. . . . He was turning his head. . . . At first glance, the corridor

was empty . . . but no . . . a man was sitting on the floor ahead, his chin drooping onto his chest, his outline gleaming in the dark. . . .

Harry put out his tongue. . . . He tasted the man's scent on the air. . . . He was alive but drowsing . . . sitting in front of a door at the end of the corridor . . .

Harry longed to bite the man . . . but he must master the impulse. . . . He had more important work to do. . . .

But the man was stirring . . . a silvery cloak fell from his legs as he jumped to his feet; and Harry saw his vibrant, blurred outline towering above him, saw a wand withdrawn from a belt. . . . He had no choice. . . . He reared high from the floor and struck once, twice, three times, plunging his fangs deeply into the man's flesh, feeling his ribs splinter beneath his jaws, feeling the warm gush of blood. . . .

The man was yelling in pain . . . then he fell silent. . . . He slumped backward against the wall. . . . Blood was splattering onto the floor . . .

His forehead hurt terribly. . . . It was aching fit to burst. . . .

"Harry! HARRY!"

He opened his eyes. Every inch of his body was covered in icy sweat; his bedcovers were twisted all around him like a straitjacket; he felt as though a white-hot poker was being applied to his forehead.

"Harry!"

Ron was standing over him looking extremely frightened. There were more figures at the foot of Harry's bed. He clutched his head in his hands; the pain was blinding him. . . . He rolled right over and vomited over the edge of the mattress.

"He's really ill," said a scared voice. "Should we call someone?"

“Harry! *Harry!*”

He had to tell Ron, it was very important that he tell him.

Taking great gulps of air, Harry pushed himself up in bed, willing himself not to throw up again, the pain half-blinding him.

“Your dad,” he panted, his chest heaving. “Your dad’s . . . been attacked . . .”

“What?” said Ron uncomprehendingly.

“Your dad! He’s been bitten, it’s serious, there was blood everywhere . . .”

“I’m going for help,” said the same scared voice, and Harry heard footsteps running out of the dormitory.

“Harry, mate,” said Ron uncertainly, “you . . . you were just dreaming . . .”

“No!” said Harry furiously; it was crucial that Ron understand. “It wasn’t a dream . . . not an ordinary dream . . . I was there, I saw it. . . . I *did* it . . .”

He could hear Seamus and Dean muttering but did not care. The pain in his forehead was subsiding slightly, though he was still sweating and shivering feverishly. He retched again and Ron leapt backward out of the way.

“Harry, you’re not well,” he said shakily. “Neville’s gone for help . . .”

“I’m fine!” Harry choked, wiping his mouth on his pajamas and shaking uncontrollably. “There’s nothing wrong with me, it’s your dad you’ve got to worry about — we need to find out where he is — he’s bleeding like mad — I was — it was a huge snake . . .”

He tried to get out of bed but Ron pushed him back into it; Dean

and Seamus were still whispering somewhere nearby. Whether one minute passed or ten, Harry did not know; he simply sat there shaking, feeling the pain recede very slowly from his scar. . . . Then there were hurried footsteps coming up the stairs, and he heard Neville's voice again.

"Over here, Professor . . ."

Professor McGonagall came hurrying into the dormitory in her tartan dressing gown, her glasses perched lopsidedly on the bridge of her bony nose.

"What is it, Potter? Where does it hurt?"

He had never been so pleased to see her; it was a member of the Order of the Phoenix he needed now, not someone fussing over him and prescribing useless potions.

"It's Ron's dad," he said, sitting up again. "He's been attacked by a snake and it's serious, I saw it happen."

"What do you mean, you saw it happen?" said Professor McGonagall, her dark eyebrows contracting.

"I don't know. . . . I was asleep and then I was there . . ."

"You mean you dreamed this?"

"No!" said Harry angrily. Would none of them understand? "I was having a dream at first about something completely different, something stupid . . . and then this interrupted it. It was real, I didn't imagine it, Mr. Weasley was asleep on the floor and he was attacked by a gigantic snake, there was a load of blood, he collapsed, someone's got to find out where he is . . ."

Professor McGonagall was gazing at him through her lopsided spectacles as though horrified at what she was seeing.

“I’m not lying, and I’m not mad!” Harry told her, his voice rising to a shout. “I tell you, I saw it happen!”

“I believe you, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall curtly. “Put on your dressing-gown — we’re going to see the headmaster.”

Die slang se oog

Sondagoggend ploeg Hermien 'n pad deur 'n halwe meter sneeu na Hagrid se hut. Harry en Ron wou graag saamgaan, maar hulle het so 'n groot berg huiswerk dat hulle teensinnig in die geselskamer agterbly en maak of hulle nie die vreugdekrete op die skoolterrein hoor nie. Die studente skaats op die verysde meer en ry toboggan, en asof dit nie erg genoeg is nie, word die Griffindor-toring se vensters bestook met getoorde sneeuballe.

“Heil!” brul Ron ongeduldig en steek sy kop deur die venster. “Ek’s ’n prefek en as nog een sneeubal hierdie venster tref – EINA!”

Hy trek sy kop vinnig terug, sy gesig vol sneeu.

“Dis Fred en George,” sê hy bitter en slaan die venster toe. “Ape...”

Hermien kom net voor middagete terug van Hagrid af. Sy bibber en haar kleed is nat tot by haar knieë.

Ron kyk op toe sy instap. “En? Het jy toe al sy lesse vir hom voorberei?”

“Ek het probeer,” sê sy dof en gaan sit in die stoel langs Harry. Sy haal haar towerstaf uit en maak ’n ingewikkelde swaaibeweginkie sodat warm lug uit die punt begin stroom. Sy rig dit op haar kleed, wat stomend droog word. “Hy was nie eens daar toe ek daar aankom nie. Ek het ten minste ’n halfuur lank geklop. En toe kom hy uit die Woud –”

Harry kreun. Die Verbode Woud krioel van dié soort diere wat kan veroorsaak dat Hagrid sy werk verloor. “Wat hou hy daar aan? Het hy gesê?”

“Nee,” sê Hermien mistroostig. “Hy sê dis ’n verrassing. Ek het probeer verduidelik van Umbridge, maar hy’t nie ore nie. Hy bly sê dat niemand by sy volle verstand eerder knarle as kimeras sal wil bestudeer nie – toe maar, ek dink nie hy het ’n kimera nie,” voeg sy by toe sy Harry en Ron se geskokte uitdrukkings sien. “Maar dis nie dat hy nie probeer het nie, dis blykbaar net baie moeilik om hulle eiers in die hande te kry. Ek het gesê hy moet eerder Growweblaar

se beplanning volg, maar ek dink nie hy't na die helfte van wat ek gesê het, geluister nie. Hy's in 'n snaakse bui. Hy wil nog steeds nie sê waar hy aan daardie beserings gekom het nie."

Nie al die studente lyk opgetoë toe Hagrid die volgende oggend aan die ontbyttafel verskyn nie. Fred, George en Lee brul van genot en nael verby Griffindor en Hoesenproes se tafels om Hagrid se tamaai hand te gaan skud, maar ander, soos Parvati en Hildegard, kyk nors na mekaar en skud hul koppe. Harry weet baie mense verkies professor Growweblaar se klasse, en die ergste is dat 'n klein, onpartydige deeltjie van hom weet hoekom. Anders as Hagrid is Growweblaar se idee van 'n interessante klas nie een waar jou kop dalk afgebyt kan word nie.

Dis met gespanne afwagting dat Harry, Ron en Hermien die Dinsdag na Hagrid se hut stap, dik aangetrek teen die koue. Harry is nie net bekommerd oor wat Hagrid beplan om met hulle te doen nie, maar ook oor hoe die res van die klas, veral Malfoy en sy trawante, hulle gaan gedra as Umbridge dalk daar is.

Maar die Hoë Ondersoeker is nêrens te sien nie terwyl hulle deur die sneeu strompel na waar Hagrid aan die kant van die Woud vir hulle staan en wag. Hy is nie 'n mooi gesig nie. Die kneusplekke wat Saterdagavond pers was, is nou groen en geel, en party van die snye bloei nog steeds. Harry kan dit nie verstaan nie: is Hagrid aangeval deur 'n soort dier met gif wat voorkom dat die wonde gesond word? Hagrid dra, tot oormaat van ramp, iets soos 'n halwe dooie bees oor sy skouer.

"Ons werk vandag hier binne!" roep hy vrolik vir die aankomende studente en wys met sy kop na die donker bome agter hom. "Bietjie meer beskut! En in elk geval, hulle verkies die donkerte."

"Wat verkies die donkerte?" vra Malfoy paniekerig vir Krabbe en Goliat. "Wat sê hy verkies die donkerte – het julle gehoor?"

Harry onthou die vorige keer dat Malfoy in die Woud was – toe was hy ook nie juis dapper nie. Harry glimlag heimlik. Ná die Kwiddiekwedstryd is enigiets wat vir Malfoy onaangenaam is, wat hom betref piekfyn.

"Gereed?" Hagrid kyk vrolik na die klas. "Nou ja, ek het hierdie uitstappie na die Woud vir julle vyfde jaar gebêre. Het gedink ons moet hierdie diere in hulle natuurlike habitat bekyk. Nou, wat julle vandag gaan sien, is baie raar. Ek dink ek is waarskynlik die enigste mens in Brittanje wat hulle al kon mak maak en leer."

"En jy's seker hulle is geleer, hè?" Malfoy klink nou erg benoud. "Dit sal nie die eerste keer wees dat jy wilde goed klas toe bring nie."

Die Slibberins brom instemmend en 'n paar Griffindors lyk ook al hulle reken Malfoy het 'n punt beet.

"Natuurlik is hulle geleer," sê Hagrid fronsend en hys die dooie bees 'n entjie hoër op sy skouer.

"Wat het dan met jou gesig gebeur?" vra Malfoy.

"Hou jou neus uit my sake," sê Hagrid kwaai. "Nou, as julle al julle dom vrae klaar gevra het, kan julle my volg!"

Hy draai om en stap na die Woud. Niemand lyk juis lus om hom te volg nie. Harry loer na Ron en Hermien, wat sug en knik voor hulle vir Hagrid agternasit. Die res van die klas volg hulle.

Hulle stap vir omtrent tien minute tot hulle by 'n plek kom waar die bome so dig groei dat dit skemerdonker is en daar geen sneeu op die grond lê nie. Hagrid sit die halwe bees kreunend neer, tree terug en kyk na die klas. Die meeste kruip van boom tot boom nader en loer benoud rond asof hulle verwag om enige oomblik aangeval te word.

"Staan nader, staan nader," moedig Hagrid hulle aan. "Nou, die reuk van die vleis sal hulle nader lok, maar ek gaan hulle in elk geval roep sodat hulle kan weet dis ek."

Hy draai om, skud sy ruie kop om die hare uit sy gesig te kry en sê: 'n vreemde, skel kreet wat soos die gekrys van 'n monsteragtige voël deur die donker bome galm. Niemand lag nie. Amper almal lyk te bang om 'n geluid te maak.

Hagrid herhaal die kras kreet. 'n Minuut gaan verby waarin die klas angstig oor hul skouers en tussen die bome deur loer op soek na wat ook al daarheen op pad is. Toe Hagrid die derde keer sy tamaai borskas vol lug trek, stamp Harry aan Ron en wys na die donker kol tussen twee skewe taksusbome.

'n Paar glansende wit oë word al groter en 'n oomblik later verskyn die draakagtige gesig, nek en skeletagtige liggaam van 'n enorme swart gevleuelde perd uit die skemer. Hy staan 'n rukkie na die klas en swaai sy lang swart stert. Dan laat sak hy sy kop en begin om die dooie bees met sy skerp slagande te verskeur.

Verligting spoel soos 'n groot brander oor Harry. Hier is die bewys dat hy hom nie net verbeel het nie, dat die diere regtig is. Hagrid weet ook van hulle. Hy kyk gretig na Ron, maar Ron staan nog steeds na die bome en ná 'n paar sekondes fluister hy: "Hoekom roep Hagrid nie weer nie?"

Die meeste mense lyk net so verward, benoud en vol afwagting as Ron. Hulle kyk oral rond behalwe na die perd wat 'n paar tree van hulle af staan. Daar is net twee ander mense wat lyk of hulle iets sien: 'n seningrige Slibberin-seun agter Goliath wat gewalg kyk hoe

die perd vreet en Neville, wie se oë na die swiepende lang swart stert staar.

“A, daar kom nog een!” sê Hagrid trots toe ’n tweede swart perd uit die donker bome verskyn en sy leeragtige vlerke styf teen sy liggaam vou voor hy sy kop laat sak en begin vreet. “Goed... steek julle hande op. Wie kan hulle sien?”

Harry steek sy hand op, in sy skik dat die geheim van die perde uiteindelik ontrafel gaan word. Hagrid knik vir hom.

“Ja, ja, ek het geweet jy sal hulle kan sien, Harry,” sê hy ernstig. “En jy ook, Neville? En –”

“Verskoon my,” sê Malfoy se smalende stem, “maar wat moet ons nou eintlik sien?”

Hagrid antwoord nie, maar wys na die karkas op die grond. Die hele klas staar daarna. Dan snak ’n paar mense na asem en Parvati skree. Harry verstaan dadelik hoekom: stukke vleis wat vanself van bene afgeskeur word en in die niet verdwyn, moet erg grieselig lyk.

“Wat gaan aan?” sê Parvati verskrik en spring agter die naaste boom in. “Wat eet daar?”

“Testralle,” sê Hagrid trots en langs Harry sê Hermien “Aa,” asof sy skielik iets verstaan. “Hogwarts het ’n hele kudde,” gaan Hagrid voort. “Nou wie van julle weet –?”

“Maar hulle is baie, baie ongelukkig!” val Parvati hom geskok in die rede. “Hulle bring vreeslike rampe oor die mense wat hulle sien. Professor Trelawney sê –”

“Nee, nee, nee,” sê Hagrid laggend, “dis bygelowe, dis wat. Hulle is baie intelligent en baie nuttig, hoor! Natuurlik doen hierdie spul nie juis iets nie, hulle trek net die skool se koetse, behalwe as Dompeldorius ’n ver ent wil reis en nie wil appareer nie. Daar kom nog ’n paar – kyk!”

Nog twee perde stap suutjies deur die bome. Een gaan baie naby aan Parvati verby, wat haar sidderend teen die boom aandruk en sê: “Ek dink ek het iets gevoel, ek dink dis hier iewers naby my!”

“Moenie worrie nie, hy sal niks aan jou doen nie,” sê Hagrid geduldig. “Goed, wie kan vir my sê hoekom party van julle hulle kan sien en ander nie?”

Hermien steek haar hand op.

“Ja?” Hagrid kyk stralend na haar.

“Die enigste mense wat testralle kan sien, is mense wat die dood aanskou het.”

“Mooi so,” sê Hagrid in sy noppies, “tien punte vir Griffindor. Nou, testralle –”

“Hem, hem.”

Professor Umbridge het opgedaag. Sy staan net paar tree agter Harry. Sy dra weer haar groen hoed en mantel en hê haar aanknipbord vas. Hagrid, wat nog nie voorheen Umbridge se vals hoesie gehoor het nie, kyk bekommerd na die naaste testras asof die geluid daarvandaan gekom het.

"Hem, hem."

"O, hallo!" Hagrid glimlag toe hy die oorsprong van die geluid raak sien.

"Het jy die nota gekry wat ek vanoggend na jou gestuur het?" vra Umbridge op dieselfde stadige, harde manier as sy voorheen gebruik het, asof sy met iemand praat wat nie normaal is nie. "Waarin ek sê dat ek hierdie les gaan inspekteer?"

"Hm, ja," sê Hagrid opgeruimd. "Ek's bly jy't dielek gekry! Wel, soos jy kan sien – of, ek weet ook nie, kan jy? ons behandel vandag testralle –"

"Ekskuus?" sê professor Umbridge hard. Sy hou haar hand agter haar oor en frons. "Wat het jy gesê?"

Hagrid lyk effens verward.

"Hm – testralle!" sê hy hard. "Groot – geveleeldorde, weet jy!"

Hy klap sy tamaai arms. Professor Umbridge lig haar wenkbroue en skryf iets op haar aanknipbord terwyl sy prewel "Moet . . . hom . . . wend . . . tot . . . primitiewe . . . gebaretaal."

"Hm . . . nou maar goed . . ." Hagrid draai terug na die klas, maar hy lyk 'n bietjie deur die wind. "Hm . . . wat het ek nou weer gesê?"

"Het . . . skynbaar . . . gebrekkige . . . korttermyn . . . geheue," prewel Umbridge hard genoeg sodat almal kan hoor. Draco Malfoy lyk asof Kersfees 'n maand vroeg is, maar Hermien word boei van onderdrukte woede.

"O . . . ja." Hagrid kyk onrustig na Umbridge se aanknipbord, maar gaan nietemin dapper voort. "Ek wou vir julle vertel hoe ek aan die kudde gekom het. Goed, ek het begin met 'n hings en vyf merries. Hierdie een," hy streel die perd wat eers daar was, "se naam is Tenebrus, hy's my gunsteling, die eerste wat in die Woud gebore is –"

"Is jy daarvan bewus," val Umbridge hom luid in die rede, "dat die Ministerie vir Towerkuns testralle as 'gevaar' geklassifiseer het?"

Harry se hart sink soos 'n klip, maar Hagrid griuk net.

"Testralle is nie gevaarlik nie! Goed, goed, hulle sal jou dalk 'n hap gee as jy hulle nou regtig kwaad maak –"

"Openbaar . . . tekens . . . van . . . genot . . . by . . . die . . . van . . . geweld," prewel Umbridge en skryf weer op haar aanknipbord.

“Nee, wag nou!” sê Hagrid, wat effens angstig lyk. “Ek bedoel, ’n hond sal jou ook byt as jy hom kwaad maak. Testralle het net ’n slegte reputasie oor die doodbesigheid – mense het geglo hulle is slegte voorbodes. Maar dis omdat hulle nie van beter geweet het nie!”

Umbridge antwoord nie. Sy skryf haar aantekening klaar voor sy na Hagrid kyk en baie stadig en nadruklik sê: “Gaan asseblief soos gewoonlik voort met die les. Ek gaan tussen die studente rondstap,” sy mimiek stap met haar vingers (Malfoy en Pansy Parkinson lag hulle slap agter hul hande) “en vir hulle vrae vra.” Sy wys na haar mond en maak praatbewegings.

Hagrid gaap haar aan asof hy nie kan verstaan hoekom sy nie gewoonweg praat nie. Trane van woede staan in Hermien se oë.

“Jou heks, jou gemene heks!” fluister sy toe Umbridge na Pansy Parkinson stap. “Ek weet waarmee jy besig is, jou aaklige, siek, lae –”

“Hm . . . in elk geval,” sê Hagrid, wat nou beslis sukkel om sy woorde agtermekaar te kry, “ja, testralle. Goed. Daar is baie goeie goed aan hulle . . .”

“Vind jy,” sê professor Umbridge in ’n helder stem vir Pansy Parkinson, “dat jy verstaan wat professor Hagrid sê?”

Nes Hermien is Pansy Parkinson se oë ook vol trane, maar dis van lag. Haar antwoord is amper onhoorbaar soos sy sukkel om haar lagbui te beheer.

“Nee . . . want . . . wel . . . dit klink . . . meestal soos ’n gesnork . . .”

Professor Umbridge skryf op haar aanknipbord. Die gedeeltes van Hagrid se gesig wat nie vol blou kolle is nie, word rooi, maar hy probeer maak asof hy nie vir Pansy gehoor het nie.

“Hm . . . ja . . . goeie goed aan testralle. As hulle eers mak is, soos hierdie klomp, sal jy nooit weer verdwaal nie. Ongelooflike sin vir rigting. Jy hoef net vir hulle te sê waarheen jy wil gaan –”

“Mits hulle jou natuurlik verstaan,” sê Malfoy hard en Pansy begin van voor af lag. Professor Umbridge glimlag toegeeflik en kyk dan na Neville.

“Jy kan die testralle ook sien, nè, Loggerenberg?”

Neville knik.

“Vir wie het jy sien doodgaan?” vra sy in ’n ongeërgde stem.

“My . . . my oupa,” sê Neville.

“En wat dink jy van hulle?” Sy beduie met haar kort vet vingers na die perde, wat reeds feitlik die hele karkas tot aan die bene verslind het.

“Hm,” sê Neville en loer senuagtig na Hagrid. “Wel, hulle is . . . hm . . . oukei . . .”

“Studente . . . is . . . te geïntimideer . . . om . . . te . . . erken . . . dat . . . hulle . . . bang . . . is,” prewel Umbridge en skryf op haar aanknipbord.

“Nee!” sê Neville en lyk ontsteld; “nee, ek’s nie vir hulle bang nie!”

“Moet jou nie ontstel nie,” sê professor Umbridge en klap Neville op die skouer terwyl sy kamstig gerusstellend glimlag, maar vir Harry lyk dit meer soos ’n grynsag.

“Wel, Hagrid,” sê sy weer hard en stadig en kyk op na hom. “Ek het oorgenoeg inligting. Jy sal” (sy maak of sy iets uit die lug haal) “die resultaat van jou inspeksie” (sy wys na die aanknipbord) “oor tien dae kry.” Sy hou tien stomp vingers in die lug en stommel dan weg, haar glimlag breër en meer padda-agtig as ooit. Malfoy en Pansy Parkinson krul van die lag, Hermien skud van woede en Neville lyk verward en ontsteld.

“Daardie vieslike, mislike, agterbakse ou liegbek!” skree Hermien toe hulle ’n halfuur later terugstap kasteel toe in die paadjies wat hulle tevore in die sneeu gemaak het. “Het julle gesien wat sy doen? Dis weer daardie ding wat sy oor halfbloeders het – sy probeer maak of Hagrid ’n soort dom trol is net omdat sy ma ’n reus was. Dis nie reg nie, dit was glad nie ’n slegte les nie – ek bedoel, as dit nou spuitsterkrewels was! – maar dis *testralle*. Vir Hagrid was dit regtig baie goed!”

“Umbridge sê hulle is gevaarlik,” sê Ron.

“Wel, soos Hagrid gesê het, hulle sal hulleself verdedig,” sê Hermien ongeduldig, “en iemand soos Growweblaar sal hulle seker eers op OTTe-vlak vir ons wys, maar julle kan nie stry nie, hulle is interessant! Om te dink dat net party mense hulle kan sien! Ek wens ek kon.”

“Regtig?” vra Harry sag.

Dit lyk of Hermien skrik.

“O, Harry, ek is jammer, nee, natuurlik nie – dit was ’n dom ding om te sê.”

“Dis oukei,” sê hy vinnig, “moenie daaroor worrie nie.”

“Ek kan nie glo dat so baie mense hulle kon sien nie,” sê Ron. “Drie in een klas –”

“Ja, Weasley, ons het juis gewonder,” sê ’n gemene stem. Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat is net agter hulle, hulle voetstappe gedemp deur die sneeu. “Wat dink jy, sal jy die Swelger beter kan sien nadat jy iemand sien afklop het?”

Hy, Krabbe en Goliat brul van die lag terwyl hulle verby Harry-hulle druk en “Weasley is ons Koning” uit volle bors begin sing. Ron se ore word bloedrooi.

“Ignoreer hulle, ignoreer hulle net,” sê Hermien. Sy haal haar towerstaf uit, doen die paljas wat warm lug uit haar towerstaf laat stroom en smelt vir hulle ’n makliker roete deur die vars sneeu na die kweekhuise.

Desember bring nog meer sneeu en ’n stortvloed huiswerk vir die vyfdejaars. Ron en Hermien se prefekpligte raak al hoe meer veel-eisend hoe nader Kersfees kom. Hulle moet toesig hou oor die versiering van die kasteel (“Probeer jy Kersversierings opsit as Nurks een punt van ’n string beethet en jou daarmee wil verwurg,” mor Ron), oor die eerste- en tweedejaars as hulle pouses weens die koue binne is (“En hulle is vir jou ’n spul astrante klein snotneuse, hoor, ons was nie so goor toe ons eerstejaars was nie,” kla Ron) en die gange om die beurt met Argus Fillis patrolleer, wat oortuig is dat die vakansiegees tot ’n hele klomp towenaarstweegevegte sal lei (“Hy het mis vir ’n brein,” sê Ron ergerlik). Hulle is so besig dat Hermien nie eens kans kry om nog elfhoede te brei nie en haar daaroor bekommer dat sy nog net drie oor het.

“Al daardie arme elwe wat ek nog nie kon vrystel nie. Hulle sal almal Kersfees hier moet bly net omdat daar nie genoeg hoede is nie!”

Harry, wat nie kans sien om vir haar te sê dat Dobbi alles wat sy maak vir hom vat nie, buk laer oor sy opstel vir Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns. Hy is in elk geval nie lus vir Kersfees nie. Vir die eerste keer in sy skoolloopbaan wil hy eerder nie tydens die vakansie by Hogwarts wees nie. Sy Kwiddiek-verbod en sy bekommernis oor of Hagrid op proef gaan wees of nie, het hom ’n weersin in die plek gegee. Al waarna hy uitsien, is die DS se byeenkomste, maar sodra die vakansie aanbreek, sal dit ook iets van die verlede wees omdat die meeste studente huis toe gaan. Hermien gaan saam met haar ouers ski, iets wat vir Ron baie snaaks is. Hy kan nie glo dat Moggels met lang smal planke onder hulle voete by sneeubedekte berghange wil afgly nie. Ron gaan vir die vakansie na Die Konynenes toe. Vir ’n hele paar dae is Harry bitter jaloers. Dis eers toe hy vir Ron vra hoe hy vir Kersfees by die huis gaan kom dat Ron sê: “Maar jy kom saam! Het ek jou nie gesê nie? Ma het weke gelede al gesê ek moet jou nooit!”

Hermien rol haar oë, maar Harry se hart sing. Die gedagte aan Kersfees in Die Konynenes is ongelooflik wonderlik, hoewel hy effens skuldig oor Sirius voel. Hy wonder of hy mevrou Weasley moontlik kan oorreed om sy peetpa ook vir Kersfees te nooit. Maar aan die een kant twyfel hy of Dompeldorius vir Sirius sal toelaat om

Grimmauldplein te verlaat, en hy dink ook nie mevrou Weasley sal hulle sit te veel vas. Sirius het nog nie weer vir Harry gekontak nadat hy die laaste keer in die vuur verskyn het nie. Harry weet hy moet hom eerder nie probeer kontak nie, nie met Umbridge gedurig op die uitkyk nie, maar hy hou niks van die gedagte aan Sirius alleen in sy ma se ou huis met Skepsel as die enigste een om 'n klapper mee te trek nie.

Harry gaan vroeër as gewoonlik na die Vertrek van Vereistes vir die laaste DS-byeenkoms voor die vakansie – en kan sy sterre dank daarvoor. Toe die fakkels vlamvat, sien hy tot sy skok dat Dobbi die plek vir Kersfees versier het. Dis nie moeilik om te weet dat dit die elf was nie. Wie anders sal 'n honderd goue balletjies met Harry se foto en die woorde “*Hou 'n versPotter vakansie!*” aan die plafon hang?

Harry het net mooi die laaste een afgehaal toe die deur krakend oopgaan en Mania Goedlief op haar gewone dromerige manier indwaal.

“Hallo,” sê sy vaag en bekyk die res van die versierings. “Dis mooi. Het jy dit gedoen?”

“Nee,” sê Harry, “dit was die huiself, Dobbi.”

“Mistel,” sê Mania dromerig en wys na 'n groot klomp wit bessies so te sê reg bo Harry se kop. Hy gee vinnig pad. “Dis beter,” sê Mania baie ernstig, “hulle is partykeer vol nargels.”

Voor Harry kan vra wat nargels is, kom Angelina, Katie en Alicia in. Al drie is uitasem en bibber van die koue.

“Wel,” sê Angelina dofweg toe sy haar mantel afhaal en in 'n hoek gooi, “ons het jou uiteindelik vervang.”

“My vervang?” sê Harry uit die veld geslaan.

“Vir jou en Fred en George,” sê sy ongeduldig. “Ons het 'n nuwe Soeker!”

“Wie?” vra Harry vinnig.

“Ginny Weasley,” sê Katie.

Harry gaap haar aan.

“Ja, ek weet.” Angelina haal haar towerstaf uit en swaai haar arm. “Maar sy's eintlik nogal goed. Natuurlik nie so goed soos jy nie,” sy gee hom 'n vuil kyk, “maar aangesien ons jou nie . . .”

Harry byt 'n snedige antwoord terug. Dink sy vir een oomblik hy is nie 'n honderd keer meer spyt as sy dat hy nie meer in die span is nie?

“En wat van die Brekers?” vra hy en probeer om sy stem kalm te hou.

“Andries Kriek,” sê Alicia sonder entoesiasme, “en Jack Sloper. Hulle's nie juis briljant nie, maar in vergelyking met die ander sotte wat gekom het . . .”

Ron, Hermien en Neville se aankoms maak 'n einde aan hierdie neerdrukkende gesprek en binne vyf minute is die kamer so vol dat Harry nie meer Angelina se verwyttende blikke raak sien nie.

“Oukei,” sê hy en maak almal stil. “Ek stel voor ons hersien vanaand al die goed wat ons al gedoen het. Dis ons laaste byeenkoms vir die kwartaal en dit gaan nie help om voor 'n vakansie van drie weke met iets nuuts te begin –”

“Ons gaan niks nuuts doen nie?” brom Sagrys Smit sodat almal kan hoor. “As ek dit geweet het, het ek nie gekom nie.”

“Ons is so jammer dat Harry nie vir jou gesê het nie,” sê Fred hard.

Verskeie mense giggel. Harry sien hoe Cho lag en dit voel of sy maag padgee, soos wanneer jy 'n treetjie mis trap.

“Ons oefen in pare,” gaan Harry voort. “Ek stel voor ons doen eers die Hindernistowerspreuk vir tien minute en dan gaan haal ons die kussings en probeer mekaar Bedwelm.”

Hulle verdeel gehoorsaam in pare, Harry werk soos altyd saam met Neville. Die kamer is gou gevul met krete van “*Impedimenta!*” Mense vries vir 'n minuut of twee terwyl hulle maats rondstaan en kyk wat die ander mense doen. Sodra hulle ontdooi het, toor hulle weer hul maats.

Neville het ongelooflike vordering gemaak. Toe Harry drie keer na mekaar ontdooi het, sluit Neville by Ron en Hermien aan sodat Harry kan rondloop en kyk wat die ander doen. Toe hy verby Cho stap, kyk sy so stralend na hom dat hy hard daarteen moet stry om nie nog 'n paar keer verby haar te stap nie.

Tien minute later pak hulle die kussings op die vloer en begin om mekaar te Bedwelm. Daar is nie genoeg plek dat almal die towerspreuk gelyk kan doen nie, dus kyk die helfte van die groep eers wat die res doen voor hulle omruil.

Wat hy sien, laat Harry swel van trots. Toegee, Neville het nou wel vir Padma Patel Bedwelm en nie vir Dean Thomas na wie hy eintlik gemik het nie, maar dit was baie amper raak en die res van die mense maak ook goeie vordering.

Ná 'n uur roep Harry halt.

“Julle is regtig baie goed,” sê hy in sy skik. “Wanneer ons terugkom ná die vakansie sal ons groter goed begin doen – dalk selfs die Patronus.”

Daar is 'n gebrom van opgewondenheid voor almal soos gewoonlik twee-twee en drie-drie begin uitstap. Die meeste wens Harry 'n geseënde Kersfees toe voor hulle loop. Hy is baie in sy skik terwyl hy, Ron en Hermien die kussings optel en wegpak. Toe Ron en

Hermien uitgaan, bly hy agter. Cho is nog in die kamer en hy hoop dat sy hom 'n geseënde Kersfees sal toewens.

“Gaan jy maar solank,” sê sy vir haar vriendin Marietta, en dit voel vir Harry of sy hart tot onder sy adamsappel spring.

Hy maak of hy die stapel kussings regstoot. Hulle is nou heeltemal alleen. Gaan sy ooit iets sê? Hy skrik toe hy iemand hoor snuif.

Hy kyk om en sien vir Cho in die middel van die vertrek staan. Ibane stroom oor haar gesig.

“Wat –?”

Harry weet nie wat om te doen nie. Hy kan nie verstaan hoekom sy huil nie.

“Wat makeer?” vra hy ongemaklik.

Sy skud haar kop en vee haar oë met haar mou af.

“Ek – ek’s jammer,” snuif sy. “Dis seker . . . dis net . . . ek leer nou al hierdie goed . . . en ek bly wonder . . . of hy nog sou gelewe het . . . as hy al hierdie goed kon doen.”

Harry se hart val verby sy gewone plek tot iewers by sy naeltjie. Hy moes geweet het. Dis oor Cedric dat sy wil praat.

“Hy kon al hierdie goed doen,” sê Harry skor. “Hy was regtig baie goed, anders sou hy nooit tot in die middel van daardie doolhof gekom het nie. Maar as Woldemort jou wil vermoor, is daar min wat jy kan doen.”

Sy hik toe hy Woldemort se naam sê, maar bly staar roerloos na hom.

“Jy het bly leef toe jy net ’n baba was,” sê sy sag.

“Ja, maar,” Harry stap na die deur, “ek weet nie hoekom nie. Niemand weet hoekom nie. Dis regtig nie iets om op trots te wees nie.”

“Wag!” sê Cho en sy klink weer tranerig. “Ek is jammer. Ek wou jou nie ontstel nie . . . ek het dit nie bedoel nie . . .”

Sy hik weer. Sy is regtig baie mooi, selfs al is haar oë rooi en geswel. Harry voel absoluut miserabel. Hy sou só in sy skik gewees het met net ’n “Geseënde Kersfees”.

“Ek weet dit moet vir jou aaklig wees om oor Cedric te praat,” sê sy en vee weer haar oë met haar mou af, “omdat jy gesien het hoe . . . hoe hy doodgaan . . . Jy wil alles seker eerder vergeet, nè?”

Harry weet nie wat om te sê nie. Sy is heeltemal reg, maar dit voel so harteloos om dit vir haar te sê.

“Jy is regtig ’n goeie onderwyser, weet jy,” sê Cho met ’n waterige glimlag. “Dis die eerste keer dat ek dit regkry om iemand te Bedwelm.”

“Dankie,” sê Harry verlee.

Hulle kyk lank na mekaar. Harry voel lus om hom vinnig uit die voete te maak, maar vir die een of ander rede kan hy nie roer nie.

"Mistel," sê Cho en wys na die plafon bo sy kop.

"Ja," sê Harry, wie se mond baie droog is, "maar dis glo vol nargels."

"Wat is nargels?"

"Ek weet nie," sê Harry. Sy het nader gekom en sy brein voel Bedwelm. "Jy sal vir Mallie moet vra – ek bedoel – vir Mania."

Cho maak 'n snaakse geluid; iewers tussen 'n snik en 'n lag. Sy staan nou nog nader aan hom. Hy kan die sproete op haar neus tel.

"Ek hou baie van jou, Harry."

Hy kan nie dink nie. 'n Tintelende sensasie vloei deur sy lyf en sy arms, bene en brein word lam.

Sy is hopeloos te naby. Hy kan elke traandruppel op haar wimpers sien . . .

Toe Harry 'n halfuur later in die geselskamer kom, sit Ron en Hermien op die beste stoele by die vuur. Amper al die ander is reeds bed toe. Hermien is besig om 'n baie lang brief te skryf, amper die helfte van die perkament hang oor die kant van die tafel. Ron lê op die matjie voor die vuur en probeer om sy Transfigurasië-huiswerk klaar te maak.

"Waar was jy?" vra hy toe Harry in die leunstoel langs Hermien neersak.

Harry antwoord nie. Hy weet nog nie mooi wat hom getref het nie. Die een helfte van hom wil vir Ron en Hermien vertel wat gebeur het, maar die ander helfte wil hierdie geheim tot in sy graf saamdra.

"Is jy oukei, Harry?" vra Hermien en loer oor haar veerpen na hom.

Harry haal net sy skouers halfhartig op. Hy weet regtig nie of hy oukei is of nie.

"Wat gaan aan?" Ron lig hom op sy elmboog om Harry se gesig beter te sien. "Wat het gebeur?"

Harry weet nie hoe om vir hulle te vertel nie en hy dink ook nie hy wil nie. Net toe hy besluit om eerder sy mond te hou, praat Hermien.

"Is dit Cho?" vra sy saaklik. "Het sy jou ná die tyd vasgekeer?"

Harry is so verbaas dat hy knik. Ron giggel, maar hou dadelik op toe Hermien kwaai na hom kyk.

"So – hm – wat wou sy hê?" vra hy gemaak terloops.

"Sy – " begin Harry skor. Hy maak sy keel skoon en probeer weer. "Sy't – hm – "

"Het julle gesoen?" vra Hermien lewendig.

Ron kom so vinnig orent dat sy inkbottel oor die matjie trek. Hy steur hom nie daaraan nie, maar kyk gretig na Harry.

"Wel?" sê hy.

Harry kyk van Ron se laggende, nuuskierige gesig na Hermien se effense frons en knik.

"HA!"

Ron slaan die lug triomfantlik met sy vuus en bars uit van die lag sodat 'n klompie tweedejaars voor die venster wip van die skrik. Harry glimlag effens terwyl Ron op die matjie voor die vuur rondol, maar Hermien kyk gebelg na Ron voor sy aangaan met skryf.

"En toe?" sê Ron eindelik en kyk na Harry. "Hoe was dit?"

Harry dink 'n rukkie.

"Nogal nat," sê hy eerlik.

Ron maak 'n geluid, of van walging of van plesier.

"Omdat sy gehuil het," erken Harry swaarwigtig.

"O." Ron se glimlag verflou effens. "Soen jy dan só sleg?"

"Ek weet nie," sê Harry, wat nog nie hieroor gewonder het nie. "Seker."

"Natuurlik nie," sê Hermien afwesig. Sy skryf nog steeds.

"Hoe weet jy?" vra Ron baie skerp.

"Omdat Cho deesdae omtrent gedurig huil," sê Hermien afgetrokke. "In die eetsaal, in die badkamers, oral."

"'n Mens sou dink 'n soen sal haar opbeur," grinnik Ron.

"Ron," sê Hermien in 'n waardige stem terwyl sy haar veerpen se punt in die inkpot doop, "jy is die gevoelloosste vrat wat ek nog ooit teëgekom het."

"Wat beteken dit miskien?" sê Ron verontwaardig. "Watter soort mens huil as iemand haar soen?"

"Ja," sê Harry effens radeloos. "Ek wil ook weet."

Hermien kyk vol bejammering na hulle.

"Kan julle nie dink hoe Cho op hierdie oomblik voel nie?" vra sy.

"Nee," sê Harry en Ron gelyk.

Hermien sug en sit haar veerpen neer.

"Wel, enigeen kan tog sien dat sy baie ongelukkig is oor Cedric se dood. En ek sou sê sy voel verward omdat sy van Cedric gehou het en nou van Harry hou en nie kan besluit van wie sy die meeste hou nie. Dan voel sy ook skuldig omdat sy voel dis dalk nie reg teenoor Cedric om nou vir Harry te soen nie en sy's bekommerd oor wat almal gaan sê as sy met Harry sou uitgaan. Sy sukkel ook om uit te werk hoe sy oor Harry voel, omdat dit hy was wat by Cedric was toe hy doodgegaan het. Dis alles baie deurmekaar en

pyklik. O; en dan is sy ook nog bang dat hulle haar uit Raweklouse Kwiddiekspan gaan skop omdat sy die laaste tyd so sleg vlieg.

’n Geskokte stilte volg op hierdie toespraak. Toe sê Ron: “Een mens kan nie al daardie goed gelyk voel nie, jy sal ontplof.”

“Net omdat jou emosies die reikwydte van ’n teelepel het, beteken nie dat alle ander mense ook so is nie,” sê Hermien ysig. Sy tel weer haar veerpen op.

“Maar sy het begin,” sê Harry. “Ek sou nie – sy’t soort van na my toe gekom – en die volgende oomblik toe huil sy op my skouer – ek het nie geweet wat om te doen nie –”

“Moenie jouself blameer nie, my ou,” sê Ron, wat geskok lyk by die gedagte aan so ’n situasie.

“Jy moes net gaaf gewees het met haar.” Hermien kyk bekommerd op. “Jy was, nie waar nie?”

“Wel,” sê Harry en sy gesig word ongemaklik warm, “ek het haar rug so soort van – getik.”

Dit lyk of Hermien net met die grootste inspanning nie haar oë rol nie. “Wel, dit kon seker erger gewees het. Gaan jy haar weer sien?”

“Ek moet seker, of hoe? Daar’s die DS-byeenkomste.”

“Dis nie wat ek bedoel nie,” sê Hermien ongeduldig.

Harry sê niks. Hermien se woorde het ’n legio skrikwekkende moontlikhede blootgelê. Hy probeer hom voorstel hoe hy en Choiewers heen gaan – dalk na Hogsmeade – en hoe hulle ’n paar uur lank bymekaar is. Ná wat gebeur het, sal sy seker verwag dat hy haar uitvra – die gedagte laat sy maag benoud op ’n knop trek.

“Nou ja,” sê Hermien afgetrokke terwyl sy verder skryf, “daar’s baie goed waarheen jy haar kan vra.”

“Wat as hy nie wil nie?” sê Ron, wat Harry ongewoon fyn dop-hou.

“Moenie simpel wees nie,” sê Hermien vaagweg. “Harry hou al lankal van haar, nê, Harry?”

Harry antwoord nie. Ja, hy hou al lankal van Cho, maar hy’t nog altyd gedink Cho sal opgewek en gelukkig wees saam met hom, nie dat sy ontroosbaar teen sy skouer sal staan en snik nie.

“Vir wie skryf jy daardie boek?” vra Ron vir Hermien. Hy probeer die stuk perkament lees wat op die vloer hang. Hermien pluk dit weg.

“Viktor.”

“Krum?”

“Hoeveel Viktors ken jy?”

Ron sê niks, maar hy lyk omgekrap. Hulle sit vir omtrent twintig

minute in stilte. Ron maak sy Transfigurasië-opstel klaar met baie ongeduldige snorke en baie uitkrappery. Hermien skryf tot aan die einde van die perkament voor sy dit oprol en verseël en Harry staar na die vuur en wens Sirius wil daarin verskyn en vir hom raadgee oor meisies. Maar die vuur brand al laer tot die rooiwarm kole tot dit verkrummel het. Harry kyk om en sien dat hulle al weer die enigste mense in die geselskamer is.

"Wel, nag," sê Hermien. Sy gaap groot toe sy na die meisies se trappe stap.

"Wat sien sy in Krum?" vra Ron toe hy en Harry met die seuns se trappe opstap.

"Wel," Harry dink daaroor. "Hy's ouer . . . en hy's 'n internasionale Kwiddiekspeler . . ."

"Ja, maar behalwe dit," sê Ron ergerlik. "Ek bedoel, hy's 'n regte minnosele ou suurknol."

"'n Bietjie kortaf, ja," sê Harry, wie se gedagtes nog steeds by Cho

Hulle trek hul klede in stilte uit en trek hul pajamas aan. Dean, Seamus en Neville slaap al. Harry sit sy bril op sy bedkassie neer en klim in sy bed, maar hy trek nie die gordyne om sy hemelbed toe nie. Hy staar na die stukkie lug wat hy deur die venster langs Neville se bed kan sien. As hy laas nag moes weet dat hy vier-en-twintig uur later vir Cho Chang sou soen . . .

"Nag," brom Ron iewers aan sy regterkant.

"Nag," sê Harry.

Dalk is sy volgende keer nie so hartseer nie . . . as daar 'n volgende keer is. Hy moes haar seker uitgevra het, sy't seker gedink hy sal dit doen en sy's nou seker baie kwaad vir hom . . . of lê sy in haar bed en huil nog steeds oor Cedric? Hy weet nie wat om te dink nie. Hermien se verduideliking het alles net nog moeiliker gemaak om te verstaan.

Dis wat hulle hier vir ons moet leer, dink hy toe hy op sy sy draai, hoe meisies se koppe werk . . . dit sal baie meer werd wees as Waarsery.

Neville snuif in sy slaap. 'n Uil hoe-hoe iewers in die nag.

Harry droom hy is terug in die Vertrek van Vereistes. Cho beskuldig hom daarvan dat hy haar onder valse voorwendsels soontoe gelok het. Sy sê hy het vir haar honderd-en-vyftig Sjokoladepaddakaarte beloof as sy sou kom. Harry stry met haar . . . Cho skree: "*Cedric het vir my tonne Sjokoladepaddakaarte gegee, kyk!*" Sy haal 'n hand vol kaarte uit haar kleed en gooi hulle in die lug. Toe swaai sy na Hermien, wat sê: "*Jy het belowe, Harry. . . ek dink jy moet*

vir haar iets anders gee . . . wat van jou Vuurslag?" En Harry sê hy kan nie vir Cho sy Vuurslag gee nie, want Umbridge het dit en die hele ding is simpel, hy't na die DS-kamer gekom om Kersversierings op te sit, kyk, hulle lyk soos Dobbi se kop .

Toe verander sy droom.

Sy liggaam voel glad en kragtig en soepel. Hy seil deur blink metaalstawe oor koue, donker klip . . . hy lê plat teen die vloer en gly op sy maag . . . dis donker, maar hy kan voorwerpe om hom sien skitter in vreemde, lewendige kleure . . . hy draai sy kop . . . eers lyk dit of die gang leeg is . . . maar nee . . . voor hom sit 'n man op die vloer met sy ken teen sy bors . . . sy buitelyn glinster in die donkerte .

Harry steek sy tong uit . . . hy proe die man se reuk in die lug die man lewe, maar hy is vaak . . . hy sit voor 'n deur aan die einde van die gang .

Harry voel 'n oorweldigende begeerte om die man te byt . . . hy moet teen die impuls veg . . . daar is belangriker dinge om te doen .

Maar die man beweeg . . . hy spring op en 'n silwer mantel val van sy bene af . . . sy vae, trillende vorm toring oor Harry . . . Harry sien hoe hy 'n towerstaf uit sy gordel trek . . . hy het nie 'n keuse nie . . . hy kom orent, slaan sy slagande een, twee, drie keer diep in die man se vleis en voel hoe die man se ribbes onder sy kake versplinter, voel die warm bloed . . .

Die man gil van pyn . . . dan word hy stil en val agteroor teen die muur . . . bloed spat oor die vloer .

Sy voorkop is verskriklik seer . . . dit voel of dit gaan oopbars .

"Harry! HARRY!"

Hy maak sy oë oop. Elke duim van sy liggaam is oortrek met yskoue sweet. Hy is toegewikkel in sy beddegoed en dit voel of iemand 'n witwarm vuuryster teen sy voorkop druk.

"Harry!"

Ron buig oor hom. Hy lyk doodverskrik. Daar is nog figure by Harry se voetenent. Hy hou sy kop in sy hande vas, die pyn is verblindend . . . hy rol om en gooi op oor die kant van die bed.

"Hy's baie siek," sê 'n benoude stem. "Ek dink ons moet iemand roep."

"Harry! Harry!"

Hy moet vir Ron sê, dis baie belangrik dat hy vir hom vertel . . . hy trek sy asem 'n paar keer diep in en stoot homself orent in sy bed, hy moenie weer opgooi nie, die pyn verblind hom.

"Jou pa," hyg hy en sy borskas dein op en neer. "Jou pa . . . is aangeval . . ."

"Wat?" Ron kyk onbegrypend na hom.

“Jou pa! Hy's gepik, dis ernstig, daar was bloed oral . . .”

“Ek gaan hulp soek,” sê dieselfde benoude stem en Harry hoor hoe iemand uit die slaapsaal hardloop.

“Harry, ou maat,” sê Ron aarselend, “jy . . . jy't net gedroom . . .”

“Nee!” sê Harry kwaad. Dit is belangrik dat Ron moet verstaan. “Dit was nie 'n droom nie . . . nie 'n gewone droom nie . . . ek was daar, ek het dit gesien . . . ek het dit gedoen . . .”

Hy hoor hoe Septimus en Dean onderlangs mompel, maar dit maak hom nie. Die pyn in sy voorkop is besig om af te neem, hoewel hy nog steeds sweet en koorsig bewe. Hy braak weer en Ron spring net beryds uit die pad.

“Harry, jy makeer iets,” sê hy bewerig. “Neville het gaan hulp soek.”

“Ek makeer niks!” wurg Harry en vee sy mond met sy pajamamou af. “Daar's niks met my verkeerd nie. Dis jou pa – hy't hulp nodig – ons moet uitvind waar hy is – hy bloei verskriklik – ek was – dit was 'n hengse groot slang.”

Hy probeer van die bed afklim, maar Ron druk hom terug. Dean en Septimus praat nog steeds in fluisterstemme met mekaar. Harry weet nie of een of tien minute verbygegaan het nie, hy sit net en bewe terwyl die pyn geleidelik uit sy litteken vloei . . . Dan hoor hy luistige voetstappe en Neville se stem.

“Hierso, professor.”

Professor McGonagall kom die slaapsaal vinnig binne. Sy dra haar tartankamerjas en haar bril sit skeef op die brug van haar dun neus.

“Wat is dit, Potter? Waar is dit seer?”

Harry was nog nooit so bly om haar te sien nie. Hy moet 'n lid van die Orde van die Feniks sien, nie iemand wat om hom koer en nuttelose towerdrankies voorskryf nie.

“Dis Ron se pa,” sê hy en sit weer regop. “Hy's deur 'n slang aangeval en dis ernstig, ek het dit gesien.”

“Wat bedoel jy jy het dit gesien?” Professor McGonagall se donker wenkbroue vertrek in 'n plooi.

“Ek weet nie . . . ek het geslaap en toe was ek daar . . .”

“Jy bedoel jy't gedroom?”

“Nee!” sê Harry verontwaardig. Kan niemand dan verstaan nie? “Ek het eers iets heeltemal anders gedroom, iets simpels . . . en toe het dit begin. Dit was werklik, ek het my nie verbeel nie. Meneer Weasley was aan die slaap op die vloer en 'n reuseslang het hom aangeval. Daar was 'n spul bloed en hy't inmeekaargesak, iemand moet uitvind waar hy is . . .”

Professor McGonagall staar geskok na hom deur haar skewe brilglase.

“Ek lieg nie en ek is ook nie mal nie!” sê Harry en sy stem word skril. “Ek sê vir julle, ek het dit gesien!”

“Ek glo jou, Potter,” sê professor McGonagall kortaf. “Trek jou kamerjas aan – ons gaan na die skoolhoof.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



ST. MUNGO'S HOSPITAL FOR MAGICAL MALADIES AND INJURIES

Harry was so relieved that she was taking him seriously that he did not hesitate, but jumped out of bed at once, pulled on his dressing gown, and pushed his glasses back onto his nose.

“Weasley, you ought to come too,” said Professor McGonagall.

They followed Professor McGonagall past the silent figures of Neville, Dean, and Seamus, out of the dormitory, down the spiral stairs into the common room, through the portrait hole, and off along the Fat Lady’s moonlit corridor. Harry felt as though the panic inside him might spill over at any moment; he wanted to run, to yell for

Dumbledore. Mr. Weasley was bleeding as they walked along so sedately, and what if those fangs (Harry tried hard not to think “my fangs”) had been poisonous? They passed Mrs. Norris, who turned her lamplike eyes upon them and hissed faintly, but Professor McGonagall said, “Shoo!” Mrs. Norris slunk away into the shadows, and in a few minutes they had reached the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore’s office.

“Fizzing Whizbee,” said Professor McGonagall.

The gargoyle sprang to life and leapt aside; the wall behind it split in two to reveal a stone staircase that was moving continuously upward like a spiral escalator. The three of them stepped onto the moving stairs; the wall closed behind them with a thud, and they were moving upward in tight circles until they reached the highly polished oak door with the brass knocker shaped like a griffin.

Though it was now well past midnight, there were voices coming from inside the room, a positive babble of them. It sounded as though Dumbledore was entertaining at least a dozen people.

Professor McGonagall rapped three times with the griffin knocker, and the voices ceased abruptly as though someone had switched them all off. The door opened of its own accord and Professor McGonagall led Harry and Ron inside.

The room was in half darkness; the strange silver instruments standing on tables were silent and still rather than whirring and emitting puffs of smoke as they usually did. The portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses covering the walls were all snoozing in their frames. Behind the door, a magnificent red-and-gold bird the size of a swan dozed on its perch with its head under its

wing.

“Oh, it’s you, Professor McGonagall . . . and . . . *ah*.”

Dumbledore was sitting in a high-backed chair behind his desk; he leaned forward into the pool of candlelight illuminating the papers laid out before him. He was wearing a magnificently embroidered purple-and-gold dressing gown over a snowy-white nightshirt, but seemed wide awake, his penetrating light-blue eyes fixed intently upon Professor McGonagall.

“Professor Dumbledore, Potter has had a . . . well, a nightmare,” said Professor McGonagall. “He says . . .”

“It wasn’t a nightmare,” said Harry quickly.

Professor McGonagall looked around at Harry, frowning slightly.

“Very well, then, Potter, you tell the headmaster about it.”

“I . . . well, I *was* asleep . . .” said Harry and even in his terror and his desperation to make Dumbledore understand he felt slightly irritated that the headmaster was not looking at him, but examining his own interlocked fingers. “But it wasn’t an ordinary dream . . . it was real. . . . I saw it happen. . . .” He took a deep breath, “Ron’s dad — Mr. Weasley — has been attacked by a giant snake.”

The words seemed to reverberate in the air after he had said them, slightly ridiculous, even comic. There was a pause in which Dumbledore leaned back and stared meditatively at the ceiling. Ron looked from Harry to Dumbledore, white-faced and shocked.

“How did you see this?” Dumbledore asked quietly, still not looking at Harry.

“Well . . . I don’t know,” said Harry, rather angrily — what did it matter? “Inside my head, I suppose —”

“You misunderstand me,” said Dumbledore, still in the same calm tone. “I mean . . . can you remember — er — where you were positioned as you watched this attack happen? Were you perhaps standing beside the victim, or else looking down on the scene from above?”

This was such a curious question that Harry gaped at Dumbledore; it was almost as though he knew . . .

“I was the snake,” he said. “I saw it all from the snake’s point of view . . .”

Nobody else spoke for a moment, then Dumbledore, now looking at Ron, who was still whey-faced, said in a new and sharper voice, “Is Arthur seriously injured?”

“Yes,” said Harry emphatically — why were they all so slow on the uptake, did they not realize how much a person bled when fangs that long pierced their side? And why could Dumbledore not do him the courtesy of looking at him?

But Dumbledore stood up so quickly that Harry jumped, and addressed one of the old portraits hanging very near the ceiling.

“Everard?” he said sharply. “And you too, Dilys!”

A sallow-faced wizard with short, black bangs and an elderly witch with long silver ringlets in the frame beside him, both of whom seemed to have been in the deepest of sleeps, opened their eyes immediately.

“You were listening?” said Dumbledore.

The wizard nodded, the witch said, “Naturally.”

“The man has red hair and glasses,” said Dumbledore. “Everard, you will need to raise the alarm, make sure he is found by the right

people —”

Both nodded and moved sideways out of their frames, but instead of emerging in neighboring pictures (as usually happened at Hogwarts), neither reappeared; one frame now contained nothing but a backdrop of dark curtain, the other a handsome leather armchair. Harry noticed that many of the other headmasters and mistresses on the walls, though snoring and drooling most convincingly, kept sneaking peeks at him under their eyelids, and he suddenly understood who had been talking when they had knocked.

“Everard and Dilys were two of Hogwarts’s most celebrated Heads,” Dumbledore said, now sweeping around Harry, Ron, and Professor McGonagall and approaching the magnificent sleeping bird on his perch beside the door. “Their renown is such that both have portraits hanging in other important Wizarding institutions. As they are free to move between their own portraits they can tell us what may be happening elsewhere . . .”

“But Mr. Weasley could be anywhere!” said Harry.

“Please sit down, all three of you,” said Dumbledore, as though Harry had not spoken. “Everard and Dilys may not be back for several minutes. . . . Professor McGonagall, if you could draw up extra chairs . . .”

Professor McGonagall pulled her wand from the pocket of her dressing gown and waved it; three chairs appeared out of thin air, straight-backed and wooden, quite unlike the comfortable chintz armchairs that Dumbledore had conjured back at Harry’s hearing. Harry sat down, watching Dumbledore over his shoulder. Dumbledore was now stroking Fawkes’s plumed golden head with

one finger. The phoenix awoke immediately. He stretched his beautiful head high and observed Dumbledore through bright, dark eyes.

“We will need,” said Dumbledore very quietly to the bird, “a warning.”

There was a flash of fire and the phoenix had gone.

Dumbledore now swooped down upon one of the fragile silver instruments whose function Harry had never known, carried it over to his desk, sat down facing them again, and tapped it gently with the tip of his wand.

The instrument tinkled into life at once with rhythmic clinking noises. Tiny puffs of pale green smoke issued from the minuscule silver tube at the top. Dumbledore watched the smoke closely, his brow furrowed, and after a few seconds, the tiny puffs became a steady stream of smoke that thickened and coiled in the air. A serpent's head grew out of the end of it, opening its mouth wide. Harry wondered whether the instrument was confirming his story. He looked eagerly at Dumbledore for a sign that he was right, but Dumbledore did not look up.

“Naturally, naturally,” murmured Dumbledore apparently to himself, still observing the stream of smoke without the slightest sign of surprise. “But in essence divided?”

Harry could make neither head nor tail of this question. The smoke serpent, however, split itself instantly into two snakes, both coiling and undulating in the dark air. With a look of grim satisfaction Dumbledore gave the instrument another gentle tap with his wand. The clinking noise slowed and died, and the smoke serpents grew

faint, became a formless haze, and vanished.

Dumbledore replaced the instrument upon its spindly little table; Harry saw many of the old headmasters in the portraits follow him with their eyes, then, realizing that Harry was watching them, hastily pretend to be sleeping again. Harry wanted to ask what the strange silver instrument was for, but before he could do so, there was a shout from the top of the wall to their right; the wizard called Everard had reappeared in his portrait, panting slightly.

“Dumbledore!”

“What news?” said Dumbledore at once.

“I yelled until someone came running,” said the wizard, who was mopping his brow on the curtain behind him, “said I’d heard something moving downstairs — they weren’t sure whether to believe me but went down to check — you know there are no portraits down there to watch from. Anyway, they carried him up a few minutes later. He doesn’t look good, he’s covered in blood, I ran along to Elfrida Cragg’s portrait to get a good view as they left —”

“Good,” said Dumbledore as Ron made a convulsive movement, “I take it Dilys will have seen him arrive, then —”

And moments later, the silver-ringletted witch had reappeared in her picture too; she sank, coughing, into her armchair and said, “Yes, they’ve taken him to St. Mungo’s, Dumbledore. . . . They carried him past under my portrait. . . . He looks bad . . .”

“Thank you,” said Dumbledore. He looked around at Professor McGonagall.

“Minerva, I need you to go and wake the other Weasley children.”

“Of course . . .”

Professor McGonagall got up and moved swiftly to the door; Harry cast a sideways glance at Ron, who was now looking terrified. “And Dumbledore — what about Molly?” said Professor McGonagall, pausing at the door.

“That will be a job for Fawkes when he has finished keeping a lookout for anybody approaching,” said Dumbledore. “But she may already know . . . that excellent clock of hers . . .”

Harry knew Dumbledore was referring to the clock that told, not the time, but the whereabouts and conditions of the various Weasley family members, and with a pang he thought that Mr. Weasley’s hand must, even now, be pointing at “mortal peril.” But it was very late. . . . Mrs. Weasley was probably asleep, not watching the clock. . . . And he felt cold as he remembered Mrs. Weasley’s boggart turning into Mr. Weasley’s lifeless body, his glasses askew, blood running down his face. . . . But Mr. Weasley wasn’t going to die. . . . He couldn’t . . .

Dumbledore was now rummaging in a cupboard behind Harry and Ron. He emerged from it carrying a blackened old kettle, which he placed carefully upon his desk. He raised his wand and murmured “*Portus*”; for a moment the kettle trembled, glowing with an odd blue light, then it quivered to a rest, as solidly black as ever.

Dumbledore marched over to another portrait, this time of a clever-looking wizard with a pointed beard, who had been painted wearing the Slytherin colors of green and silver and was apparently sleeping so deeply that he could not hear Dumbledore’s voice when he attempted to rouse him.

“Phineas. *Phineas*.”

And now the subjects of the portraits lining the room were no longer pretending to be asleep; they were shifting around in their frames, the better to watch what was happening. When the clever-looking wizard continued to feign sleep, some of them shouted his name too.

“Phineas! *Phineas*! PHINEAS!”

He could not pretend any longer; he gave a theatrical jerk and opened his eyes wide.

“Did someone call?”

“I need you to visit your other portrait again, Phineas,” said Dumbledore. “I’ve got another message.”

“Visit my other portrait?” said Phineas in a reedy voice, giving a long, fake yawn (his eyes traveling around the room and focusing upon Harry). “Oh no, Dumbledore, I am too tired tonight . . .”

Something about Phineas’s voice was familiar to Harry. Where had he heard it before? But before he could think, the portraits on the surrounding walls broke into a storm of protest.

“Insubordination, sir!” roared a corpulent, red-nosed wizard, brandishing his fists. “Dereliction of duty!”

“We are honor-bound to give service to the present headmaster of Hogwarts!” cried a frail-looking old wizard whom Harry recognized as Dumbledore’s predecessor, Armando Dippet. “Shame on you, Phineas!”

“Shall I persuade him, Dumbledore?” called a gimlet-eyed witch, raising an unusually thick wand that looked not unlike a birch rod.

“Oh, very *well*,” said the wizard called Phineas, eyeing this wand slightly apprehensively, “though he may well have destroyed my

picture by now, he's done most of the family —”

“Sirius knows not to destroy your portrait,” said Dumbledore, and Harry realized immediately where he had heard Phineas's voice before: issuing from the apparently empty frame in his bedroom in Grimmauld Place. “You are to give him the message that Arthur Weasley has been gravely injured and that his wife, children, and Harry Potter will be arriving at his house shortly. Do you understand?”

“Arthur Weasley, injured, wife and children and Harry Potter coming to stay,” recited Phineas in a bored voice. “Yes, yes . . . very well . . .”

He sloped away into the frame of the portrait and disappeared from view at the very moment that the study door opened again. Fred, George, and Ginny were ushered inside by Professor McGonagall, all three of them looking disheveled and shocked, still in their night things.

“Harry — what's going on?” asked Ginny, who looked frightened. “Professor McGonagall says you saw Dad hurt —”

“Your father has been injured in the course of his work for the Order of the Phoenix,” said Dumbledore before Harry could speak. “He has been taken to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. I am sending you back to Sirius's house, which is much more convenient for the hospital than the Burrow. You will meet your mother there.”

“How're we going?” asked Fred, looking shaken. “Floo powder?”

“No,” said Dumbledore, “Floo powder is not safe at the moment, the Network is being watched. You will be taking a Portkey.” He

indicated the old kettle lying innocently on his desk. "We are just waiting for Phineas Nigellus to report back. . . . I wish to be sure that the coast is clear before sending you —"

There was a flash of flame in the very middle of the office, leaving behind a single golden feather that floated gently to the floor.

"It is Fawkes's warning," said Dumbledore, catching the feather as it fell. "She must know you're out of your beds. . . . Minerva, go and head her off — tell her any story —"

Professor McGonagall was gone in a swish of tartan.

"He says he'll be delighted," said a bored voice behind Dumbledore; the wizard called Phineas had reappeared in front of his Slytherin banner. "My great-great-grandson has always had odd taste in houseguests . . ."

"Come here, then," Dumbledore said to Harry and the Weasleys. "And quickly, before anyone else joins us . . ."

Harry and the others gathered around Dumbledore's desk.

"You have all used a Portkey before?" asked Dumbledore, and they nodded, each reaching out to touch some part of the blackened kettle. "Good. On the count of three then . . . one . . . two . . ."

It happened in a fraction of a second. In the infinitesimal pause before Dumbledore said "three," Harry looked up at him — they were very close together — and Dumbledore's clear blue gaze moved from the Portkey to Harry's face.

At once, Harry's scar burned white-hot, as though the old wound had burst open again — and unbidden, unwanted, but terrifyingly strong, there rose within Harry a hatred so powerful he felt, for that instant, that he would like nothing better than to strike — to bite — to

sink his fangs into the man before him —

“... *three.*”

He felt a powerful jerk behind his navel, the ground vanished from beneath his feet, his hand was glued to the kettle, he was banging into the others as all sped forward in a swirl of colors and a rush of wind, the kettle pulling them onward and then —

His feet hit the ground so hard that his knees buckled, the kettle clattered to the ground and somewhere close at hand a voice said, “Back again, the blood traitor brats, is it true their father’s dying —?”

“OUT!” roared a second voice.

Harry scrambled to his feet and looked around; they had arrived in the gloomy basement kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. The only sources of light were the fire and one guttering candle, which illuminated the remains of a solitary supper. Kreacher was disappearing through the door to the hall, looking back at them malevolently as he hitched up his loincloth; Sirius was hurrying toward them all, looking anxious. He was unshaven and still in his day clothes; there was also a slightly Mundungus-like whiff of stale drink about him.

“What’s going on?” he said, stretching out a hand to help Ginny up. “Phineas Nigellus said Arthur’s been badly injured —”

“Ask Harry,” said Fred.

“Yeah, I want to hear this for myself,” said George.

The twins and Ginny were staring at him. Kreacher’s footsteps had stopped on the stairs outside.

“It was —” Harry began; this was even worse than telling

McGonagall and Dumbledore. "I had a — a kind of — vision . . ."

And he told them all that he had seen, though he altered the story so that it sounded as though he had watched from the sidelines as the snake attacked, rather than from behind the snake's own eyes. . . . Ron, who was still very white, gave him a fleeting look, but did not speak. When Harry had finished, Fred, George, and Ginny continued to stare at him for a moment. Harry did not know whether he was imagining it or not, but he fancied there was something accusatory in their looks. Well, if they were going to blame him for just seeing the attack, he was glad he had not told them that he had been inside the snake at the time. . . .

"Is Mum here?" said Fred, turning to Sirius.

"She probably doesn't even know what's happened yet," said Sirius. "The important thing was to get you away before Umbridge could interfere. I expect Dumbledore's letting Molly know now."

"We've got to go to St. Mungo's," said Ginny urgently. She looked around at her brothers; they were of course still in their pajamas. "Sirius, can you lend us cloaks or anything — ?"

"Hang on, you can't go tearing off to St. Mungo's!" said Sirius.

"Course we can go to St. Mungo's if we want," said Fred, with a mulish expression, "he's our dad!"

"And how are you going to explain how you knew Arthur was attacked before the hospital even let his wife know?"

"What does that matter?" said George hotly.

"It matters because we don't want to draw attention to the fact that Harry is having visions of things that are happening hundreds of miles away!" said Sirius angrily. "Have you any idea what the

Ministry would make of that information?"

Fred and George looked as though they could not care less what the Ministry made of anything. Ron was still white-faced and silent. Ginny said, "Somebody else could have told us. . . . We could have heard it somewhere other than Harry . . ."

"Like who?" said Sirius impatiently. "Listen, your dad's been hurt while on duty for the Order and the circumstances are fishy enough without his children knowing about it seconds after it happened; you could seriously damage the Order's —"

"We don't care about the dumb Order!" shouted Fred.

"It's our dad dying we're talking about!" yelled George.

"Your father knew what he was getting into, and he won't thank you for messing things up for the Order!" said Sirius angrily in his turn. "This is how it is — this is why you're not in the Order — you don't understand — there are things worth dying for!"

"Easy for you to say, stuck here!" bellowed Fred. "I don't see you risking your neck!"

The little color remaining in Sirius's face drained from it. He looked for a moment as though he would quite like to hit Fred, but when he spoke, it was in a voice of determined calm. "I know it's hard, but we've all got to act as though we don't know anything yet. We've got to stay put, at least until we hear from your mother, all right?"

Fred and George still looked mutinous. Ginny, however, took a few steps over to the nearest chair and sank into it. Harry looked at Ron, who made a funny movement somewhere between a nod and shrug, and they sat down too. The twins glared at Sirius for another

minute, then took seats on either side of Ginny.

“That’s right,” said Sirius encouragingly, “come on, let’s all let’s all have a drink while we’re waiting. *Accio Butterbeer!*”

He raised his wand as he spoke and half a dozen bottles came flying toward them out of the pantry, skidded along the table, scattering the debris of Sirius’s meal, and stopped neatly in front of the six of them. They all drank, and for a while the only sounds were those of the crackling of the kitchen fire and the soft thud of their bottles on the table.

Harry was only drinking to have something to do with his hands. His stomach was full of horrible hot, bubbling guilt. They would not be here if it were not for him; they would all still be asleep in bed. And it was no good telling himself that by raising the alarm he had ensured that Mr. Weasley was found, because there was also the inescapable business of it being he who had attacked Mr. Weasley in the first place. . . .

Don’t be stupid, you haven’t got fangs, he told himself, trying to keep calm, though the hand on his butterbeer bottle was shaking. *You were lying in bed, you weren’t attacking anyone*. . . .

But then, what just happened in Dumbledore’s office? he asked himself. *I felt like I wanted to attack Dumbledore too*. . . .

He put the bottle down on the table a little harder than he meant to, so that it slopped over onto the table. No one took any notice. Then a burst of fire in midair illuminated the dirty plates in front of them and as they gave cries of shock, a scroll of parchment fell with a thud onto the table, accompanied by a single golden phoenix tail feather.

“Fawkes!” said Sirius at once, snatching up the parchment. “That’s

not Dumbledore's writing — it must be a message from your mother — here —”

He thrust the letter into George's hand, who ripped it open and read aloud, *“Dad is still alive. I am setting out for St. Mungo's now. Stay where you are. I will send news as soon as I can. Mum.”*

George looked around the table.

“Still alive . . .” he said slowly. “But that makes it sound . . .”

He did not need to finish the sentence. It sounded to Harry too as though Mr. Weasley was hovering somewhere between life and death. Still exceptionally pale, Ron stared at the back of his mother's letter as though it might speak words of comfort to him. Fred pulled the parchment out of George's hands and read it for himself, then looked up at Harry, who felt his hand shaking on his butterbeer bottle again and clenched it more tightly to stop the trembling.

If Harry had ever sat through a longer night than this one he could not remember it. Sirius suggested once that they all go to bed, but without any real conviction, and the Weasleys' looks of disgust were answer enough. They mostly sat in silence around the table, watching the candle wick sinking lower and lower into liquid wax, now and then raising bottles to their lips, speaking only to check the time, to wonder aloud what was happening, and to reassure one another that if there was bad news, they would know straightaway, for Mrs. Weasley must long since have arrived at St. Mungo's.

Fred fell into a doze, his head sagging sideways onto his shoulder. Ginny was curled like a cat on her chair, but her eyes were open. Harry could see them reflecting the firelight. Ron was sitting with his head in his hands, whether awake or asleep it was impossible to tell.

And he and Sirius looked at each other every so often, intruders upon the family grief, waiting . . . waiting . . .

And then, at ten past five in the morning by Ron's watch, the door swung open and Mrs. Weasley entered the kitchen. She was extremely pale, but when they all turned to look at her, Fred, Ron, and Harry half-rising from their chairs, she gave a wan smile.

"He's going to be all right," she said, her voice weak with tiredness. "He's sleeping. We can all go and see him later. Bill's sitting with him now, he's going to take the morning off work."

Fred fell back into his chair with his hands over his face. George and Ginny got up, walked swiftly over to their mother, and hugged her. Ron gave a very shaky laugh and downed the rest of his butterbeer in one.

"Breakfast!" said Sirius loudly and joyfully, jumping to his feet. "Where's that accursed house-elf? Kreacher! KREACHER!"

But Kreacher did not answer the summons.

"Oh, forget it, then," muttered Sirius, counting the people in front of him. "So it's breakfast for — let's see — seven . . . Bacon and eggs, I think, and some tea, and toast —"

Harry hurried over to the stove to help. He did not want to intrude upon the Weasleys' happiness, and he dreaded the moment when Mrs. Weasley would ask him to recount his vision. However, he had barely taken plates from the dresser when Mrs. Weasley lifted them out of his hands and pulled him into a hug.

"I don't know what would have happened if it hadn't been for you, Harry," she said in a muffled voice. "They might not have found Arthur for hours, and then it would have been too late, but thanks to

you he's alive and Dumbledore's been able to think up a good cover story for Arthur being where he was, you've no idea what trouble he would have been in otherwise, look at poor Sturgis . . .”

Harry could hardly stand her gratitude, but fortunately she soon released him to turn to Sirius and thank him for looking after her children through the night. Sirius said that he was very pleased to have been able to help, and hoped they would all stay with him as long as Mr. Weasley was in hospital.

“Oh, Sirius, I'm so grateful. . . . They think he'll be there a little while and it would be wonderful to be nearer . . . Of course, that might mean we're here for Christmas . . .”

“The more the merrier!” said Sirius with such obvious sincerity that Mrs. Weasley beamed at him, threw on an apron, and began to help with breakfast.

“Sirius,” Harry muttered, unable to stand it a moment longer. “Can I have a quick word? Er — *now?*”

He walked into the dark pantry and Sirius followed. Without preamble Harry told his godfather every detail of the vision he had had, including the fact that he himself had been the snake who had attacked Mr. Weasley.

When he paused for breath, Sirius said, “Did you tell Dumbledore this?”

“Yes,” said Harry impatiently, “but he didn't tell me what it meant. Well, he doesn't tell me anything anymore . . .”

“I'm sure he would have told you if it was anything to worry about,” said Sirius steadily.

“But that's not all,” said Harry in a voice only a little above a

whisper. "Sirius, I . . . I think I'm going mad. . . . Back in Dumbledore's office, just before we took the Portkey . . . for a couple of seconds there I thought I was a snake, I *felt* like one — my scar really hurt when I was looking at Dumbledore — Sirius, I wanted to attack him —"

He could only see a sliver of Sirius's face; the rest was in darkness.

"It must have been the aftermath of the vision, that's all," said Sirius. "You were still thinking of the dream or whatever it was and —"

"It wasn't that," said Harry, shaking his head. "It was like something rose up inside me, like there's a *snake* inside me —"

"You need to sleep," said Sirius firmly. "You're going to have breakfast and then go upstairs to bed, and then you can go and see Arthur after lunch with the others. You're in shock, Harry; you're blaming yourself for something you only witnessed, and it's lucky you *did* witness it or Arthur might have died. Just stop worrying. . . ."

He clapped Harry on the shoulder and left the pantry, leaving Harry standing alone in the dark.

Everyone but Harry spent the rest of the morning sleeping. He went up to the bedroom he had shared with Ron over the summer, but while Ron crawled into bed and was asleep within minutes, Harry sat fully clothed, hunched against the cold metal bars of the bedstead, keeping himself deliberately uncomfortable, determined not to fall into a doze, terrified that he might become the serpent again in his sleep and awake to find that he had attacked Ron, or else slithered

through the house after one of the others. . . .

When Ron woke up, Harry pretended to have enjoyed a refreshing nap too. Their trunks arrived from Hogwarts while they were eating lunch, so that they could dress as Muggles for the trip to St. Mungo's. Everybody except Harry was riotously happy and talkative as they changed out of their robes into jeans and sweatshirts, and they greeted Tonks and Mad-Eye, who had turned up to escort them across London, gleefully laughing at the bowler hat Mad-Eye was wearing at an angle to conceal his magical eye and assuring him, truthfully, that Tonks, whose hair was short and bright pink again, would attract far less attention on the underground.

Tonks was very interested in Harry's vision of the attack on Mr. Weasley, something he was not remotely interested in discussing.

"There isn't any *Seer* blood in your family, is there?" she inquired curiously, as they sat side by side on a train rattling toward the heart of the city.

"No," said Harry, thinking of Professor Trelawney and feeling insulted.

"No," said Tonks musingly, "no, I suppose it's not really prophecy you're doing, is it? I mean, you're not seeing the future, you're seeing the present. . . . It's odd, isn't it? Useful, though. . . ."

Harry did not answer; fortunately they got out at the next stop, a station in the very heart of London, and in the bustle of leaving the train he was able to allow Fred and George to get between himself and Tonks, who was leading the way. They all followed her up the escalator, Moody clunking along at the back of the group, his bowler tilted low and one gnarled hand stuck in between the buttons of his

coat, clutching his wand. Harry thought he sensed the concealed eye staring hard at him, trying to deflect more questions about his dream. He asked Mad-Eye where St. Mungo's was hidden.

"Not far from here," grunted Moody as they stepped out into the wintry air on a broad store-lined street packed with Christmas shoppers. He pushed Harry a little ahead of him and stumped along just behind; Harry knew the eye was rolling in all directions under the tilted hat. "Wasn't easy to find a good location for a hospital. Nowhere in Diagon Alley was big enough and we couldn't have it underground like the Ministry — unhealthy. In the end they managed to get hold of a building up here. Theory was sick wizards could come and go and just blend in with the crowd . . ."

He seized Harry's shoulder to prevent them being separated by a gaggle of shoppers plainly intent on nothing but making it into a nearby shop full of electrical gadgets.

"Here we go," said Moody a moment later.

They had arrived outside a large, old-fashioned, red brick department store called Purge and Dowse Ltd. The place had a shabby, miserable air; the window displays consisted of a few chipped dummies with their wigs askew, standing at random and modeling fashions at least ten years out of date. Large signs on all the dusty doors read CLOSED FOR REFURBISHMENT. Harry distinctly heard a large woman laden with plastic shopping bags say to her friend as they passed, "It's *never* open, that place . . ."

"Right," said Tonks, beckoning them forward to a window displaying nothing but a particularly ugly female dummy whose false eyelashes were hanging off and who was modeling a green nylon

pinafore dress. "Everybody ready?"

They nodded, clustering around her; Moody gave Harry another shove between the shoulder blades to urge him forward and Tonks leaned close to the glass, looking up at the very ugly dummy and said, her breath steaming up the glass, "Wotcher . . . We're here to see Arthur Weasley."

For a split second, Harry thought how absurd it was for Tonks to expect the dummy to hear her talking that quietly through a sheet of glass, when there were buses rumbling along behind her and all the racket of a street full of shoppers. Then he reminded himself that dummies could not hear anyway. Next second his mouth opened in shock as the dummy gave a tiny nod, beckoned its jointed finger, and Tonks had seized Ginny and Mrs. Weasley by the elbows, stepped right through the glass and vanished.

Fred, George, and Ron stepped after them; Harry glanced around at the jostling crowd; not one of them seemed to have a glance to spare for window displays as ugly as Purge and Dowse Ltd.'s, nor did any of them seem to have noticed that six people had just melted into thin air in front of them.

"C'mon," growled Moody, giving Harry yet another poke in the back and together they stepped forward through what felt like a sheet of cool water, emerging quite warm and dry on the other side.

There was no sign of the ugly dummy or the space where she had stood. They had arrived in what seemed to be a crowded reception area where rows of witches and wizards sat upon rickety wooden chairs, some looking perfectly normal and perusing out-of-date copies of *Witch Weekly*, others sporting gruesome disfigurements

such as elephant trunks or extra hands sticking out of their chests. The room was scarcely less quiet than the street outside, for many of the patients were making very peculiar noises. A sweaty-faced witch in the center of the front row, who was fanning herself vigorously with a copy of the *Daily Prophet*, kept letting off a high-pitched whistle as steam came pouring out of her mouth, and a grubby-looking warlock in the corner clanged like a bell every time he moved, and with each clang his head vibrated horribly, so that he had to seize himself by the ears and hold it steady.

Witches and wizards in lime-green robes were walking up and down the rows, asking questions and making notes on clipboards like Umbridge's. Harry noticed the emblem embroidered on their chests: a wand and bone, crossed.

"Are they doctors?" he asked Ron quietly.

"Doctors?" said Ron, looking startled. "Those Muggle nutters that cut people up? Nah, they're Healers."

"Over here!" called Mrs. Weasley over the renewed clanging of the warlock in the corner, and they followed her to the queue in front of a plump blonde witch seated at a desk marked INQUIRIES. The wall behind her was covered in notices and posters saying things like A CLEAN CAULDRON KEEPS POTIONS FROM BECOMING POISONS and ANTIDOTES ARE ANTI-DON'TS UNLESS APPROVED BY A QUALIFIED HEALER.

There was also a large portrait of a witch with long silver ringlets that was labelled

Dilys was eyeing the Weasley party as though counting them; when Harry caught her eye she gave a tiny wink, walked sideways out of her portrait, and vanished.

Meanwhile, at the front of the queue, a young wizard was performing an odd on-the-spot jig and trying, in between yelps of pain, to explain his predicament to the witch behind the desk.

“It’s these — ouch — shoes my brother gave me — ow — they’re eating my — OUCH — feet — look at them, there must be some kind of — AARGH — jinx on them and I can’t — AAAAARGH — get them off —”

He hopped from one foot to the other as though dancing on hot coals.

“The shoes don’t prevent you reading, do they?” said the blonde witch irritably, pointing at a large sign to the left of her desk. “You want Spell Damage, fourth floor. Just like it says on the floor guide. Next!”

The wizard hobbled and pranced sideways out of the way, the Weasley party moved forward a few steps and Harry read the floor guide:

ARTIFACT ACCIDENTS

Ground Floor

(Cauldron explosion, wand backfiring, broom crashes, etc.)

CREATURE-INDUCED INJURIES

First Floor

(Bites, stings, burns, embedded spines, etc.)

MAGICAL BUGS

Second Floor

(Contagious maladies, e.g., dragon pox, vanishing sickness, scrofungulus)

POTION AND PLANT POISONING Third Floor

(Rashes, regurgitation, uncontrollable giggling, etc.)

SPELL DAMAGE

Fourth Floor

(Unlifiable jinxes, hexes, and incorrectly applied charms, etc.)

VISITORS' TEAROOM AND HOSPITAL SHOP . . . Fifth Floor

If you are unsure where to go, incapable of normal speech, or unable to remember why you are here, our Welcome Witch will be pleased to help.

A very old, stooped wizard with a hearing trumpet had shuffled to the front of the queue now.

"I'm here to see Broderick Bode!" he wheezed.

"Ward forty-nine, but I'm afraid you're wasting your time," said the witch dismissively. "He's completely addled, you know, still thinks he's a teapot. . . . Next!"

A harassed-looking wizard was holding his small daughter tightly by the ankle while she flapped around his head using the immensely

large, feathery wings that had sprouted right out the back of her romper suit.

“Fourth floor,” said the witch in a bored voice, without asking, and the man disappeared through the double doors beside the desk, holding his daughter like an oddly shaped balloon. “Next!”

Mrs. Weasley moved forward to the desk.

“Hello,” she said. “My husband, Arthur Weasley, was supposed to be moved to a different ward this morning, could you tell us — ?”

“Arthur Weasley?” said the witch, running her finger down a long list in front of her. “Yes, first floor, second door on the right, Dai Llewellyn ward.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Come on, you lot.”

They followed through the double doors and along the narrow corridor beyond, which was lined with more portraits of famous Healers and lit by crystal bubbles full of candles that floated up on the ceiling, looking like giant soapsuds. More witches and wizards in lime-green robes walked in and out of the doors they passed; a foul-smelling yellow gas wafted into the passageway as they passed one door, and every now and then they heard distant wailing. They climbed a flight of stairs and entered the “Creature-Induced Injuries” corridor, where the second door on the right bore the words “DANGEROUS” DAI LLEWELLYN WARD: SERIOUS BITES. Underneath this was a card in a brass holder on which had been handwritten *Healer-in-Charge: Hippocrates Smethwyck, Trainee Healer: Augustus Pye.*

“We’ll wait outside, Molly,” Tonks said. “Arthur won’t want too many visitors at once. . . . It ought to be just the family first.”

Mad-Eye growled his approval of this idea and set himself with

his back against the corridor wall, his magical eye spinning in all directions. Harry drew back too, but Mrs. Weasley reached out a hand and pushed him through the door, saying, "Don't be silly, Harry, Arthur wants to thank you . . ."

The ward was small and rather dingy as the only window was narrow and set high in the wall facing the door. Most of the light came from more shining crystal bubbles clustered in the middle of the ceiling. The walls were of panelled oak and there was a portrait of a rather vicious-looking wizard on the wall, captioned URQUHART RACKHARROW, 1612–1697, INVENTOR OF THE ENTRAIL-EXPELLING CURSE.

There were only three patients. Mr. Weasley was occupying the bed at the far end of the ward beside the tiny window. Harry was pleased and relieved to see that he was propped up on several pillows and reading the *Daily Prophet* by the solitary ray of sunlight falling onto his bed. He looked around as they walked toward him and, seeing whom it was, beamed.

"Hello!" he called, throwing the *Prophet* aside. "Bill just left, Molly, had to get back to work, but he says he'll drop in on you later . . ."

"How are you, Arthur?" asked Mrs. Weasley, bending down to kiss his cheek and looking anxiously into his face. "You're still looking a bit peaky . . ."

"I feel absolutely fine," said Mr. Weasley brightly, holding out his good arm to give Ginny a hug. "If they could only take the bandages off, I'd be fit to go home."

"Why can't they take them off, Dad?" asked Fred.

"Well, I start bleeding like mad every time they try," said Mr.

Weasley cheerfully, reaching across for his wand, which lay on his bedside cabinet, and waving it so that six extra chairs appeared at his bedside to seat them all. "It seems there was some rather unusual kind of poison in that snake's fangs that keeps wounds open. They're sure they'll find an antidote, though, they say they've had much worse cases than mine, and in the meantime I just have to keep taking a Blood-Replenishing Potion every hour. But that fellow over there," he said, dropping his voice and nodding toward the bed opposite in which a man lay looking green and sickly and staring at the ceiling. "Bitten by a *werewolf*, poor chap. No cure at all."

"A werewolf?" whispered Mrs. Weasley, looking alarmed. "Is he safe in a public ward? Shouldn't he be in a private room?"

"It's two weeks till full moon," Mr. Weasley reminded her quietly. "They've been talking to him this morning, the Healers, you know, trying to persuade him he'll be able to lead an almost normal life. I said to him — didn't mention names, of course — but I said I knew a werewolf personally, very nice man, who finds the condition quite easy to manage . . ."

"What did he say?" asked George.

"Said he'd give me another bite if I didn't shut up," said Mr. Weasley sadly. "And that woman over *there*," he indicated the only other occupied bed, which was right beside the door, "won't tell the Healers what bit her, which makes us all think it must have been something she was handling illegally. Whatever it was took a real chunk out of her leg, *very* nasty smell when they take off the dressings."

"So, you going to tell us what happened, Dad?" asked Fred,

pulling his chair closer to the bed.

“Well, you already know, don’t you?” said Mr. Weasley, with a significant smile at Harry. “It’s very simple — I’d had a very long day, dozed off, got sneaked up on, and bitten.”

“Is it in the *Prophet*, you being attacked?” asked Fred, indicating the newspaper Mr. Weasley had cast aside.

“No, of course not,” said Mr. Weasley, with a slightly bitter smile, “the Ministry wouldn’t want everyone to know a dirty great serpent got —”

“Arthur!” said Mrs. Weasley warningly.

“— got — er — me,” Mr. Weasley said hastily, though Harry was quite sure that was not what he had meant to say.

“So where were you when it happened, Dad?” asked George.

“That’s my business,” said Mr. Weasley, though with a small smile. He snatched up the *Daily Prophet*, shook it open again and said, “I was just reading about Willy Widdershins’s arrest when you arrived. You know Willy turned out to be behind those regurgitating toilets last summer? One of his jinxes backfired, the toilet exploded, and they found him lying unconscious in the wreckage covered from head to foot in —”

“When you say you were ‘on duty,’” Fred interrupted in a low voice, “what were you doing?”

“You heard your father,” whispered Mrs. Weasley, “we are not discussing this here! Go on about Willy Widdershins, Arthur —”

“Well, don’t ask me how, but he actually got off on the toilet charge,” said Mr. Weasley grimly. “I can only suppose gold changed hands —”

“You were guarding it, weren’t you?” said George quietly. “The weapon? The thing You-Know-Who’s after?”

“George, be quiet!” snapped Mrs. Weasley.

“Anyway,” said Mr. Weasley in a raised voice, “this time Willy’s been caught selling biting doorknobs to Muggles, and I don’t think he’ll be able to worm his way out of it because according to this article, two Muggles have lost fingers and are now in St. Mungo’s for emergency bone regrowth and memory modification. Just think of it, Muggles in St. Mungo’s! I wonder which ward they’re in?”

And he looked eagerly around as though hoping to see a signpost.

“Didn’t you say You-Know-Who’s got a snake, Harry?” asked Fred, looking at his father for a reaction. “A massive one? You saw it the night he returned, didn’t you?”

“That’s enough,” said Mrs. Weasley crossly. “Mad-Eye and Tonks are outside, Arthur, they want to come and see you. And you lot can wait outside,” she added to her children and Harry. “You can come and say good-bye afterward. Go on . . .”

They trooped back into the corridor. Mad-Eye and Tonks went in and closed the door of the ward behind them. Fred raised his eyebrows.

“Fine,” he said coolly, rummaging in his pockets, “be like that. Don’t tell us anything.”

“Looking for these?” said George, holding out what looked like a tangle of flesh-colored string.

“You read my mind,” said Fred, grinning. “Let’s see if St. Mungo’s puts Imperturbable Charms on its ward doors, shall we?”

He and George disentangled the string and separated five

Extendable Ears from each other. Fred and George handed them around. Harry hesitated to take one.

“Go on, Harry, take it! You saved Dad’s life, if anyone’s got the right to eavesdrop on him it’s you . . .”

Grinning in spite of himself, Harry took the end of the string and inserted it into his ear as the twins had done.

“Okay, go!” Fred whispered.

The flesh-colored strings wriggled like long skinny worms, then snaked under the door. For a few seconds Harry could hear nothing, then he heard Tonks whispering as clearly as though she were standing right beside him.

“ . . . they searched the whole area but they couldn’t find the snake anywhere, it just seems to have vanished after it attacked you, Arthur. . . . But You-Know-Who can’t have expected a snake to get in, can he?”

“I reckon he sent it as a lookout,” growled Moody, “’cause he’s not had any luck so far, has he? No, I reckon he’s trying to get a clearer picture of what he’s facing and if Arthur hadn’t been there the beast would’ve had much more time to look around. So Potter says he saw it all happen?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Weasley. She sounded rather uneasy. “You know, Dumbledore seems almost to have been waiting for Harry to see something like this . . .”

“Yeah, well,” said Moody, “there’s something funny about the Potter kid, we all know that.”

“Dumbledore seemed worried about Harry when I spoke to him this morning,” whispered Mrs. Weasley.

“Course he’s worried,” growled Moody. “The boy’s seeing things from inside You-Know-Who’s snake. . . . Obviously, Potter doesn’t realize what that means, but if You-Know-Who’s possessing him —”

Harry pulled the Extendable Ear out of his own, his heart hammering very fast and heat rushing up his face. He looked around at the others. They were all staring at him, the strings still trailing from their ears, looking suddenly fearful.

Sint Mungo se Hospitaal vir Magiese Kwinte en Kwale

Harry is so verlig dat iemand hom ernstig opneem dat hy dadelik uit die bed spring, sy kamerjas aantrek en sy bril op sy neus sit.

"Weasley, jy behoort saam te kom," sê professor McGonagall.

Hulle volg professor McGonagall verby Neville, Dean en Septimus, wat nog steeds doodstil staan, uit die slaapsaal, af met die wenteltrap na die geselskamer, deur die portretopening tot in die Vroegste Vrou se maanverligte gang. Harry voel asof hy kan skree van angst. Hy wil hardloop en vir Dompeldorius roep. Meneer Weasley lê en bloei terwyl hulle ewe rustig aanstap. Wat as daardie slagtande (Harry probeer hard om nie daaraan as "my slagtande" te dink nie) gillig was? Hulle stap verby mevrou Norris wat haar groot oë na hulle draai en vir hulle sis, maar professor McGonagall sê "Skoert!" en mevrou Norris verdwyn in die skaduwees. 'n Paar minute later is hulle by die klipdrakekop wat die ingang na Dompeldorius se kantoor bewaak.

"Sissende Sisbee," sê professor McGonagall.

Die drakekop word lewend en spring uit die pad. Die muur gaan oop en hulle sien 'n kliptrap wat soos 'n wentelende roltrap boontoe draai. Hulle klim op die bewegende trappe en die muur gaan met 'n slag agter hulle toe. Hulle wentel tot bo en stop voor 'n blinkgepoleerde eikehoutdeur met 'n koperklopper in die vorm van 'n griffioen.

Hoewel dit reeds ná twaalf is, is daar 'n gebabbel van stemme in die vertrek. Dit klink of Dompeldorius ten minste twaalf mense onthaal.

Professor McGonagall klop drie keer met die griffioenklopper en die stemme hou eensklaps op asof iemand hulle skielik afgeskakel het. Die deur gaan vanself oop en professor McGonagall stap voor Harry en Ron in.

Die kamer is halfdonker, die vreemde silwer instrumente op die tafels is roerloos en nie soos gewoonlik besig om te tol of rook af te gee nie. Die portrette van ou skoolhoofde teen die mure slaap

almaal in hul rame. Op 'n stok agter die deur sit 'n manjifieke rooi-en-goue voël so groot soos 'n swaan met sy kop onder sy vlerk en slaap.

"O, dis jy, professor McGonagall . . . en . . . a."

Dompeldorius sit in die hoërugstoel agter sy lessenaar. Hy leun vorentoe in die poel kerslig wat op die papiere voor hom val. Hy het 'n ryklik geborduurde pers-en-goue kamerjas oor 'n sneeuwit naghemp aan, maar hy is wawyd wakker en sy priemende ligblou oë kyk intens na professor McGonagall.

"Professor Dompeldorius, Potter het . . . wel . . . 'n nagmerrie gehad," sê professor McGonagall. "Hy sê . . ."

"Dit was nie 'n nagmerrie nie," sê Harry dadelik.

Professor McGonagall kyk fronsend na Harry. "Goed, Potter, vertel jy dan vir die hoof."

"Ek . . . wel . . . ek het geslaap," sê Harry, wat baie graag wil hê Dompeldorius moet verstaan. Hy voel afgehaal toe die skoolhoof nie na hom kyk nie, maar na sy eie verstrengelde vingers staar. "Maar dit was nie 'n gewone droom nie . . . dit was werklik . . . ek het dit gesien gebeur . . ." Hy trek sy asem diep in. "Ron se pa, meneer Weasley, is deur 'n reusagtige slang aangeval."

Dis of sy woorde 'n rukkie lank in die vertrek vibreer sodat dit effens verspot, selfs komies klink. Daar volg 'n stilte waarin Dompeldorius agteroor leun en peinsend na die plafon staar. Ron kyk van Harry na Dompeldorius. Hy is wit in die gesig van skok.

"Hoe het jy dit gesien?" vra Dompeldorius bedaard, maar hy kyk nog steeds nie na Harry nie.

"Wel . . . ek weet nie," sê Harry effens ergerlik – wat maak dit tog saak? "Ek dink binne-in my kop . . ."

"Jy verstaan my verkeerd," sê Dompeldorius op dieselfde kalm manier. "Ek bedoel . . . kan jy onthou – hm – waar jy was toe jy die aanval gesien het? Het jy langs die slagoffer gestaan of het jy van bo af na die toneel gekyk?"

Dis so 'n vreemde vraag dat Harry vir Dompeldorius aangaap. Dis amper asof hy weet . . .

"Ek was die slang," sê hy. "Ek het alles deur die slang se oë gesien."

Vir 'n rukkie sê niemand iets nie, dan kyk Dompeldorius na Ron wat nog steeds baie bleek is, en vra in 'n skerper stem: "Is Arthur ernstig beseer?"

"Ja!" sê Harry nadruklik. Hoekom vat dit so lank vir almal om te verstaan? Besef hulle nie hoe erg iemand bloei wanneer sulke lang slagtande in sy sy geslaan is nie? En hoekom kyk Dompeldorius nie na hom nie?

Maar Dompeldorius staan so vinnig op dat Harry skrik. Hy gaan staan voor een van die portrette wat naby die plafon hang. "Everard?" sê hy skerp. "En jy ook, Dilys!"

'n Bleek towenaar met 'n kort swart kuif en 'n bejaarde heks met lang silwer krulletjies in die raam langsaa, wat albei lyk of hulle vas geslaap het, se oë gaan dadelik oop.

"Het julle geluister?" vra Dompeldorius.

Die towenaar knik en die heks sê: "Natuurlik."

"Die man het rooi hare en 'n bril," sê Dompeldorius. "Everard, jy moet alarm maak. Maak seker dat die regte mense hom kry –"

Hulle knik albei en glip uit hul rame, maar pleks dat hulle in 'n naburige portret verskyn (soos gewoonlik by Hogwarts gebeur), maak hulle weg. Die een raam is nou heeltemal leeg behalwe die donker gordyn op die agtergrond. In die ander raam staan 'n mooi leerstoel. Harry sien nou dat die meeste van die ander skoolhoofde in die portrette teen die muur af en toe van onder hul ooglede na hom loer, hoewel hulle baie oortuigend snork en kwyl. Skielik besef hy wie so gepraat het toe hulle aan die deur geklop het.

"Everard en Dilys is twee van Hogwarts se mees gevierde skoolhoofde," sê Dompeldorius en swiep verby Harry, Ron en professor McGonagall na die manjifieke slapende voël op die stok langs die deur. "Hulle is so beroemd dat hulle portrette ook in ander beroemde towerinrigtings hang. Aangesien hulle vryelik tussen hul eie portrette kan beweeg, kan hulle gaan kyk wat aangaan en vir ons kom sê."

"Maar ons weet nie waar meneer Weasley is nie!" sê Harry.

"Kom sit hier, julle drie," sê Dompeldorius asof Harry nie gepraat het nie. "Everard en Dilys sal waarskynlik 'n hele rukkie weg wees. Professor McGonagall, as jy 'n paar ekstra stoele sal optower."

Professor McGonagall haal haar towerstaf uit haar kamerjas se sak en waai dit. Drie stoele verskyn uit die niet. Hulle is van hout en het 'n hoë rugkante, heeltemal anders as die gemaklike leunstoele wat Dompeldorius by Harry se verhoor opgetower het. Harry gaan sit en kyk oor sy skouer na waar Dompeldorius Fawkes se gepluimde goue kop met een vinger streel. Die feniks word onmiddellik wakker. Hy strek sy pragtige nek en staar met helder donker ogies na Dompeldorius.

"Ons benodig," sê Dompeldorius baie saggies vir die voël, "'n waarskuwing."

Daar is 'n straal van vuur en die feniks verdwyn.

Dompeldorius stap nou na een van die fyn silwer instrumente

wat Harry nie ken nie en dra dit na sy lessenaar. Hy gaan sit oorkant hulle en tik liggies met sy towerstaf se punt daarteen.

Die instrument begin onmiddellik beweeg met 'n ritmiese klingelgeluid. Wolkies bleekgroen rook warrel uit 'n silwer buisie boaan. Dompeldorius hou die rook fyn dop, 'n frons tussen sy oë. Binne 'n paar sekondes verander die wolkies in 'n aaneenlopende stroom rook wat dikker word en in die lug krul. 'n slang se kop groei uit die punt, sy mond wyd oop. Harry wonder of die instrument sy storie bevestig. Hy loer gretig na Dompeldorius. Sal hy vir hom 'n teken gee? Maar Dompeldorius kyk nie op nie.

“Natuurlik, natuurlik,” praat Dompeldorius skynbaar met homself. Hy staar nog steeds na die stroom rook asof dit hom glad nie verbaas nie. “Maar in wese verdeel?”

Harry verstaan nie wat dié vraag beteken nie. Die rookslang verdeel egter onmiddellik in twee slange wat albei in die donker lug krul. Dompeldorius tik die instrument nog 'n keer liggies met sy towerstaf. Hy lyk grimmig, maar ook tevrede. Die geklingel sterf weg en die rookslang word dowwer tot net vormlose wasem oorbly en wegraak.

Dompeldorius sit die instrument terug op die speakbeentafeltjie. Harry sien dat baie van die ou skoolhoofde in die portrette hom met hulle oë volg. Toe hulle besef dat Harry na hulle kyk, maak hulle gou weer of hulle slaap. Harry wil nog vra wat die eienaardige silwer instrument nou eintlik doen, toe iemand regs bo teen die muur na hulle roep. Die towenaar Everard is terug in sy portret. Hy hyg effens.

“Dompeldorius!”

“Wat is die nuus?” vra Dompeldorius dadelik.

“Ek het geskree tot iemand gekom het,” sê die towenaar en vee sy voorkop aan die gordyn agter hom af. “Vir hulle gesê ek het iets daar onder gehoor – hulle wou my eers nie glo nie, maar het tog soontoe gegaan – jy weet mos daar's nie portrette daar onder waarvandaan ek kan kyk nie. In elk geval, hulle het hom 'n paar minute later ingedra. Hy lyk nie goed nie. Vol bloed. Ek het na Elfrida Cragg se portret genael om beter te kan sien –”

Ron maak 'n krampagtige beweging.

“Goed,” sê Dompeldorius. “Ek neem aan Dilys sal hom sien as hy daar aankom –”

'n Paar oomblikke later verskyn die heks met die silwer krullertjies in haar portret. Sy val hoesend in haar leunstoel neer. “Ja, hulle het hom na Sint Mungo geneem . . . hulle't hom verby my portret gedra . . . hy lyk sleg . . .”

“Dankie,” sê Dompeldorius. Hy kyk na professor McGonagall. “Minerva, ek dink jy moet die ander Weasley-kindere gaan roep.”

“Natuurlik.”

Professor McGonagall staan op en stap vinnig na die deur. Harry lyk sydelings na Ron, wat beangs lyk.

Professor McGonagall steek in die deur vas. “Wat van Molly?”

“Dis ’n taak vir Fawkes wanneer hy klaar hier waggehou het,” sê Dompeldorius. “Maar sy weet dalk reeds . . . daardie horlosie van haar is uitstekend . . .”

Harry weet Dompeldorius bedoel die horlosie wat nie die tyd aandui nie, maar waar en in watter toestand al die lede van die Weasley-gesin is. Hy besef met ’n skok dat meneer Weasley se wyser nou op *Doodsgevaar* moet staan. Maar dis baie laat, mevrou Weasley slaap seker al. Harry word koud toe hy onthou hoe mevrou Weasley se boggart in meneer Weasley se leweloze liggaam verander het, sy bril skeef, bloed oor sy gesig . . . maar meneer Weasley sal nie doodgaan nie . . . hy mag nie . . .

Dompeldorius vroetel nou in die kas agter Harry en Ron. Hy haal ’n ou swart ketel uit en sit dit versigtig op sy lessenaar neer. Hy lig sy towerstaf en prewel: “*Portus!*” Die ketel bewe effens en gloei met ’n vreemde blou lig. Dan kom dit trillend tot rus, nog net so solied swart soos tevore.

Dompeldorius stap na die portret van ’n towenaar met ’n bokbaard wat baie slim lyk en in Slibberin se groen-en-silwer kleure getooi is. Hy slaap so vas dat hy nie hoor toe Dompeldorius hom roep nie.

“Phineas. Phineas.”

Die inwoners van die ander portrette maak nie meer of hulle slaap nie. Hulle skuif in hul rame rond om beter te kan sien. Toe die towenaar wat so slim lyk nog steeds maak of hy slaap, roep ’n paar van die ander.

“Phineas! Phineas! PHINEAS!”

Hy kan nie langer voorgee nie. Hy skrik kamma wakker en maak sy oë wyd oop.

“Het iemand my geroep?”

“Jy moet dadelik na jou ander portret gaan, Phineas,” sê Dompeldorius. “Ek het ’n boodskap.”

“Na my ander portret?” sê Phineas in ’n bewerige stemmetjie en gaap kastig lank (sy oë dwaal deur die vertrek en fokus op Harry). “O nee, Dompeldorius, ek is regtig vannag te moeg.”

Iets in Phineas se stem klink vir Harry bekend. Waar het hy dit al tevore gehoor? Hy wonder nog daaroor toe die ander portrette teen die omringende mure luidkeels protesteer.

“Diensweiering, meneer!” brul ’n vet towenaar met ’n rooi neus en lig sy vuus. “Versaking van jou pligte!”

“Om die skoolhoof van Hogwarts by te staan, is ’n kwessie van eer!” skree ’n tenger towenaar wat Harry herken as Dompeldorius se voorganger, Armando Dippet. “Skaam jou, Phineas!”

“Sal ek hom oorreed, Dompeldorius?” skree ’n heks met deurborende oë. Sy lig ’n dik towerstaf wat nogal baie soos ’n roede lyk.

“Goed, goed,” sê Phineas en loer benoud na die dik towerstaf. “Hoewel hy my portret seker al teen hierdie tyd vernietig het, hyt van die meeste familieleden ontslae geraak –”

“Sirius weet hy moenie jou portret vernietig nie,” sê Dompeldorius en Harry besef dadelik waar hy Phineas se stem gehoor het: in die leë portretraam in sy slaapkamer in Grimmauldplein. “Sê vir hom Arthur Weasley is ernstig beseer en dat sy vrou, kinders en Harry Potter binnekort by sy huis gaan opdaag. Het jy dit?”

“Arthur Weasley beseer, vrou en kinders en Harry Potter op pad,” herhaal Phineas in ’n verveelde stem. “Ja, ja . . . goed dan . . .”

Hy skuifel uit die portretraam en verdwyn uit sig die oomblik toe die studeerkamer se deur weer oopgaan. Fred, George en Ginny kom saam met professor McGonagall binne. Al drie het nagklere aan en lyk verward en geskok.

“Harry – wat gaan aan?” vra Ginny verskrik. “Professor McGonagall sê jy’t gesien hoe Pa seerkry –”

“Julle vader is beseer in die uitvoering van sy pligte vir die Orde van die Feniks,” sê Dompeldorius voor Harry iets kan sê. “Hy is na Sint Mungo se Hospitaal vir Magiese Kwinte en Kwale geneem. Ek stuur julle nou terug na Sirius se huis, dit is baie nader aan die hospitaal as Die Konynenes. Julle sal julle moeder daar ontmoet.”

“Hoe gaan ons daar kom?” vra Fred, wat erg geskok lyk. “Floo-poeier?”

“Nee,” sê Dompeldorius, “Floo-poeier is nie op die oomblik veilig nie, die netwerk word dopgehou. Julle sal ’n Poortsleutel neem.” Hy wys na die ou ketel wat ewe onskuldig op sy lessenaar staan. “Ons wag net vir Phineas Nigellus om verslag te doen. Ek moet seker wees alles is veilig voor ek julle soontoe stuur.”

Daar is ’n ligflits in die middel van die vertrek en ’n enkele goue veer sweef grond toe.

“Fawkes se waarskuwing!” Dompeldorius vang die veer uit die lug. “Professor Umbridge weet julle is nie in julle beddens nie. Minerva, keer haar – vertel vir haar enigiets –”

Professor McGonagall verdwyn in ’n warreling van tartan.

“Hy sê met die grootste graagte,” sê ’n verveelde stem agter Dompeldorius. Die towenaar by name Phineas staan weer voor die Slibberin-banier. “My agter-agterkleinseun het nog altyd ’n voorliefde vir eenaardige gaste gehad.”

“Nou maar kom hier,” sê Dompeldorius vir Harry en die Weasleys. “Maak gou, voor iemand anders ook hier is.”

Hulle gaan staan om Dompeldorius se lessenaar.

“Julle weet hoe om ’n Poortsleutel te gebruik, nê?” Hulle knik en steek hul hande uit om iewers aan die swartgebrande ketel te raak.

“Goed. Ek tel drie. Een . . . twee . . .”

Dit gebeur in ’n breukdeel van ’n sekonde: in daardie vlietende oomblik voor Dompeldorius “drie” sê. Harry kyk na hom – hulle staan baie naby aan mekaar – Dompeldorius se helderblou oë beweeg van die Poortsleutel na Harry se gesig.

Onmiddellik brand Harry se litteken witwarm asof ’n ou wond oopgebars het en ongevraag, maar skrikwekkend sterk, wel daar in Harry ’n haat op wat só sterk is dat hy vir ’n oomblik niks anders wil doen as om toe te slaan nie. Om te byt, om sy slagtande in die man voor hom te slaan –

“ . . . drie.”

Harry voel ’n kragtige pluk net agter sy naeltjie, die grond verdwyn onder sy voete, sy hand sit vas aan die ketel en hy stamp teen die ander terwyl hulle in ’n warreling van kleur en wind deur die lug trek. Die ketel trek hulle vorentoe . . . tot sy voete die grond so hard tref dat sy knieë onder hom knak. Die ketel kletter op die grond neer en iewers naby hulle sê ’n stem:

“Die bloedverraaiers se snuiters is al weer hier. Is dit waar dat hulle pa besig is om te vrek?”

“UIT!” brul ’n tweede stem.

Harry skarrel orent en kyk rond. Hulle is in Grimmauldplein 12 se skemerdonker kelderkombuis. Die enigste lig kom van die vuur en een flikkerende kers wat die oorblyfsels van ’n eensame aandete verlig. Skepsel glip by die deur uit tot in die voorportaal, kyk boosaardig na hulle en trek sy lendedoek op. Sirius kom vinnig nader, ’n angstige trek op sy gesig. Hy is ongeskeer, dra nog sy dagklere en ruik effens na ou drank soos Mundungus.

“Wat gaan aan?” vra hy en steek sy hand uit om Ginny op te help. “Phineas Nigellus het gesê Arthur is ernstig beseer –”

“Vra vir Harry,” sê Fred.

“Ja, ek wil ook hoor,” sê George.

Die tweeling en Ginny staar hom aan. Skepsel se voetstappe op die trappe het stil geword.

“Dit was –” begin Harry. Dis selfs erger as om vir McGonagall en Dompeldorius te vertel. “Ek het ’n – ’n soort – gesig gesien.”

Hy vertel vir hulle presies wat hy gesien het, hoewel hy die storie só verander dat dit klink asof hy eenkant gestaan en kyk het hoe die slang vir meneer Weasley aanval en dit nie self deur die slang se oë gesien het nie. Ron, wat nog steeds baie wit is, kyk vlugtig na hom, maar sê niks. Toe Harry klaar is, staar Fred, George en Ginny ’n rukkie na hom. Harry weet nie of hy hom verbeel nie, maar dit voel of hulle beskuldigend lyk. Wel, as hulle hom gaan blameer net omdat hy die aanval gesien het, is hy bly hy het nie vir hulle gesê hy was binne-in die slang nie.

“Is Ma hier?” vra Fred en kyk na Sirius.

“Sy weet seker nog nie eens wat gebeur het nie. Die belangrikste ding was om julle daar weg te kry voor Umbridge kan inmeng. Ek sou sê Dompeldorius is seker nou besig om vir Molly in te lig.”

“Ons moet na Sint Mungo gaan,” sê Ginny dringend. Sy kyk na haar broers wat ook nog hulle pajamas aanhet. “Sirius, het jy vir ons mantels of goed om te leen?”

“Wag ’n bietjie, julle kan nie sommer afsit Sint Mungo toe nie!” sê Sirius.

“Natuurlik kan ons soontoe gaan as ons wil,” sê Fred koppig. “Hy’s ons pa!”

“En hoe gaan julle verklaar dat julle selfs voor sy vrou van die aanval op Arthur weet?”

“Wat maak dit saak?” vra George vererg.

“Dit maak saak omdat ons nie aandag wil vestig op die feit dat Harry gesigte sien van goed wat honderde kilometers hiervandaan gebeur nie!” sê Sirius ergerlik. “Het julle enige idee wat die Ministerie met sulke inligting sal doen?”

Fred en George lyk asof hulle nie die minste omgee wat die Ministerie met enigiets doen nie. Ron is nog steeds asvaal en doodstil.

“Iemand anders kon vir ons gesê het,” probeer Ginny. “Ons kon dit iewers anders as by Harry gehoor het.”

“By wie nogal?” sê Sirius ongeduldig. “Luister, julle pa is beseer terwyl hy vir die Orde gewerk het. Die omstandighede is agterdogwekkend genoeg sonder dat sy kinders sekondes later weet wat gebeur het. Julle kan die Orde ernstige skade berokken –”

“Ons gee nie om vir die flippen Orde nie!” skree Fred.

“Dis ons pa wat doodgaan van wie ons praat!” gil George.

“Julle pa het geweet waarin hy hom begewe en hy sal nie beïndruk wees as julle alles vir die Orde opmors nie!” sê Sirius, net so ergerlik. “Dis hoe dit werk – dis hoekom julle nie in die Orde is nie.

julle verstaan nie – daar is dinge waarvoor 'n mens bereid is om te sterf!”

“Jy kan maklik praat, jy sit net hier!” sê Fred. “Ek sien nie dat jy jou blootstel nie!”

Die bietjie kleur in Sirius se wange vloei weg. Vir 'n oomblik lyk dit of hy lus het om Fred te slaan, maar toe hy weer praat, is sy stem baie kalm.

“Ek weet dis moeilik, maar ons moet nou eers almal voorgee dat ons nog niks weet nie. Ons moet hier bly, of ten minste tot ons van julle ma gehoor het, oukei?”

Fred en George lyk nog steeds opstandig, maar Ginny gee 'n paar treë na die naaste stoel en val daarin neer. Harry kyk na Ron, wat 'n snaakse beweging tussen 'n knik en 'n skouerophaling maak en ook gaan sit. Die tweeling gluur nog 'n rukkie na Sirius voor hulle hulle aan weerskante van Ginny neerplak.

“Goed so,” sê Sirius bemoedigend, “kom ons . . . kom ons drink iets terwyl ons wag. Accio Botterbier!”

Hy lig sy towerstaf en 'n halfdosyn bottels vlieg uit die spens, gly oor die tafel deur die oorblyfsels van Sirius se aandete en kom voor hulle tot stilstand. Hulle drink dit en vir 'n rukkie is die enigste geluid die geknetter van die vuur in die kombuis en die gedempte geklink van bottels op die tafel.

Harry drink net om sy hande besig te hou. Sy maag is vol aaklige, warm, borrelende skuldgevoelens. Hulle sou nie hier gewees het as dit nie vir hom was nie; hulle sou nog steeds in hul beddens geslaap het. En dit help nie om vir homself te probeer sê dat hy alarm gemaak en so gesorg het dat meneer Weasley gevind is nie. Want hy kan nie daarvan wegkom dat hy vir meneer Weasley aangeval het nie.

Moenie simpel wees nie, jy het nie slagande nie, sê hy vir homself in 'n poging om kalm te bly, hoewel sy hand om die bierbottel skud. Jy't in jou bed gelê, jy't niemand aangeval nie . . .

Maar wat het nou net in Dompeldorius se kantoor gebeur? vra hy homself af. Ek wou ook vir Dompeldorius aanval . . .

Hy sit die bottel 'n bietjie harder op die tafel neer as wat hy wou en dit val om. Niemand kom iets agter nie. Dan verlig 'n helder vlam voor hulle die vuil borde op die tafel. Hulle skree van skrik toe 'n rol perkament en 'n enkele goue feniksveer op die tafel val.

“Fawkes!” sê Sirius dadelik en raap die perkament op. “Dis nie Dompeldorius se handskrif nie – dit moet 'n boodskap van julle ma wees – hierso –”

Hy druk die brief in George se hande, wat dit oopskeur en hardop lees: "Julle pa lewe nog. Ek is op pad na Sint Mungo. Bly waar julle is. Ek laat weet julle so gou moontlik wat aangaan. Ma."

George kyk na die gesigte om die tafel.

"Lewe nog . . ." sê hy stadig. "Dit laat dit klink asof . . ."

Hy hoef nie die sin te voltooi nie. Dit klink vir Harry ook asof meneer Weasley iewers tussen lewe en dood huiwer. Ron is nog steeds besonder bleek. Hy staar na sy ma se brief asof hy troos daarin soek. Fred vat die perkament uit George se hand en lees dit self. Dan kyk hy na Harry, wat voel hoe sy hand opnuut om die bierbottel bewe. Hy hou die bottel stywer vas in die hoop dat sy hand sal ophou skud.

Harry kan nie onthou dat hy al 'n langer nag as hierdie een beleef het nie. Sirius stel een keer floutjies voor dat hulle gaan inkruip, maar die Weasleys kyk minagtend na hom. Hulle sit vir die grootste gedeelte van die nag in stilte om die tafel en kyk hoe die kerspit al laer in die blaker wegsak, terwyl hulle elke nou en dan 'n bottel na hul monde lig. Hulle praat net as iemand die tyd wil weet of hardop wonder wat aangaan of as hulle mekaar probeer verseker dat hulle dadelik sal weet as daar slegte nuus is, omdat mevrou Weasley al lankal by Sint Mungo moet wees.

Fred raak aan die slaap en sy kop val skuins op sy skouer. Ginny krul soos 'n kat in haar stoel op, maar haar oë is oop, Harry kan hulle in die lig van die vuur sien blink. Ron sit met sy kop in sy hande. Dis moeilik om te sê of hy slaap of wakker is. Harry en Sirius kyk af en toe na mekaar, vreemdelinge by 'n angstige familie, wat wag . . . en wag .

Toe dit volgens Ron se horlosie tien oor vyf is, swaai die kombuisdeur oop en mevrou Weasley kom binne. Sy is baie bleek, maar toe hulle uit hul stoele opspring, glimlag sy moeg.

"Hy gaan oukei wees." Haar stem bewe van uitputting. "Hy slaap. Ons kan hom later gaan sien. Bill sit op die oomblik by hom, hy gaan nie vandag werk toe nie."

Fred val terug in sy stoel met sy hande oor sy gesig. George en Ginny stap vinnig na hul ma en omhels haar. Ron lag beweerig en slaan die res van sy Botterbier met een teug weg.

"Ontbyt!" sê Sirius bly en spring orent. "Waar is daardie vervloekte huiself? Skepsel? SKEPSEL?"

Maar Skepsel kom nie.

"Ag, vergeet dit," brom Sirius en tel die mense om hom. "Dis dan ontbyt vir – laat ek sien – sewe . . . spek en eiers, dink ek, en tee en roosterbrood –"

Harry draf stoof toe om hom te help. Hy wil nie inbreuk maak op die Weasleys se vreugde nie en hy vrees die oomblik dat mevrou Weasley hom oor sy visioen gaan uitvra. Maar hy het skaars die borde uit die kombuiske kas gehaal of mevrou Weasley neem dit uit sy hande en vou hom in haar arms toe.

"Ek weet nie wat met hom sou gebeur het as dit nie vir jou was nie, Harry," sê sy in 'n gesmoorde stem. "Hulle sou hom seker ure later eers gekry het en dan sou dit te laat gewees het, maar danksy jou lewe hy nog. Dompeldorius het 'n goeie storie uitgedink om te verduidelik hoekom Arthur juis daar was. Julle kan julle nie voorstel hoe diep in die moeilikheid hy andersins sou wees nie, dink aan die arme Sturgis . . ."

Harry kan haar dankbaarheid amper nie verduur nie, maar gelukkig laat los sy hom kort daarna en draai na Sirius om hom te bedank dat hy die nag na die kinders omgesien het. Sirius sê dit was 'n plesier en dat hulle gerus by hom kan bly solank meneer Weasley in die hospitaal is.

"O, Sirius, ek is so bly . . . Hulle dink hy sal 'n rukkie daar moet bly en dit sal wonderlik wees om so naby te wees, maar dit sal beteken dat ons Kersfees hier gaan wees."

"Hoe meer siele, hoe meer vreugde!" sê Sirius met soveel warmte dat mevrou Weasley stralend na hom kyk, dadelik 'n voorskoot ombind en hom help om ontbyt te maak.

"Sirius," prewel Harry, wat dit nie langer kan verduur nie. "Kan ek gou vir jou iets sê? Soos in – nou?"

Hy stap na die donker spens en Sirius volg hom. Harry vertel dadelik elke besonderheid van sy visioen vir sy peetpa, ook die feit dat hy die slang was wat meneer Weasley aangeval het.

Toe hy stilbly om asem te skep, sê Sirius: "Het jy dit vir Dompeldorius gesê?"

"Ja," sê Harry ongeduldig, "maar hy't nie vir my gesê wat dit beteken nie. Wel, hy sê nooit meer vir my iets nie."

"Ek is seker hy sou vir jou gesê het as dit iets was waaroor jy jou moet bekommer," sê Sirius kalm.

"Maar dis nie al nie," sê Harry in 'n baie sagte fluisterstem. "Sirius, ek . . . ek dink ek is besig om mal te word. Daar in Dompeldorius se kantoor, net voor ons die Poortsleutel geneem het . . . het ek vir 'n paar sekondes gedink ek is 'n slang. Ek het soos een gevoel – my litteken was baie seer toe ek na Dompeldorius kyk – Sirius, ek wou hom aanval!"

Hy kan net 'n gedeelte van Sirius se gesig sien, die res is in die donker.

“Dit moet ’n soort naskok van die visioen wees,” sê Sirius. “Jy’t nog steeds aan die droom of wat ook al gedink en –”

“Dis nie dit nie.” Harry skud sy kop. “Dit was of iets in my opgestaan het, asof daar ’n slang binne-in my is.”

“Jy moet gaan slaap,” sê Sirius beslis. “Gaan eet ontbyt en gaan dan bed toe. Ná middagete kan jy saam met die ander vir Arthur gaan kuier. Jy’s net geskok, Harry. Jy blameer jouself vir iets wat jy net gesien het, en dis ’n geluk dat jy dit wel gesien het, anders was Arthur nou dood. Hou nou op worrie.”

Hy klap Harry op die skouer en stap uit. Harry bly alleen in die donker spens agter.

Die res van die oggend slaap almal behalwe Harry. Hy stap saam op na die slaapkamer wat hy en Ron die laaste paar weke van die somervakansie gedeel het, maar toe Ron oomblikke nadat hy gaan lê het aan die slaap raak, sit Harry ten volle aangetrek opgekrul teen die bedstyl se koue metaalstawe. Hy wil aspris so ongemaklik moontlik wees, want hy is vasberade om nie aan die slaap te raak nie. Wat as hy weer in sy slaap ’n slang word en wakker word en sien dat hy vir Ron aangeval het of deur die huis geseil het op soek na een van die ander.

Toe Ron wakker word, maak Harry of hy ook uitgerus is. Terwyl hulle middagete eet, daag hulle Hogwarts-trommels op, en hulle kan soos Moggels aantrek vir die rit na Sint Mungo. Almal behalwe Harry is opgewek en gesels onophoudelik terwyl hulle hul pajamas uittrek en jeans en truie aantrek.

Toe Tonks en Maloog opdaag om saam met hulle deur Londen te gaan, groet hulle mekaar opgewonde en skaterlag vir Maloog se bolhoedjie. Hy dra dit skeef om sy toweroog te versteek en verseker hulle dat Tonks, wie se hare nou helderpienk en baie kort is, baie minder aandag op die moltrein sal trek.

Tonks stel baie belang in Harry se visioen van die aanval op meneer Weasley, maar dis iets waaroor Harry liever nie wil praat nie.

“Is daar enige Sieners in jou familie?” vra sy toe hulle langs mekaar op die trein sit en na die hartjie van die stad ratel.

“Nee,” sê Harry, wat aan professor Trelawney dink en beledig voel.

“Nee,” sê Tonks peinsend. “Nee, ek skat dis nie regtig profesie nie, nè? Ek bedoel, jy’t nie die toekoms gesien nie, maar die hede . . . Dis snaaks, nie waar nie? Maar nuttig . . .”

Harry antwoord nie. Gelukkig klim hulle by die volgende halte af. Dis ’n stasie in die middel van Londen en in die harwar kry hy dit reg dat Fred en George tussen hom en Tonks beland, wat voor

loop. Hulle volg haar na die roltrap. Moodie volg klaterend heel agter, sy bolhoedjie baie laag oor sy gesig getrek en een knoetsige hand tussen die knope van sy jas om sy towerstaf geklem. Harry verbeel hom hy voel hoe die versteekte oog na hom kyk. Hy wil trillig nie met nog vrae oor sy droom bestook word nie en vra dus vir Maloog waar Sint Mungo versteek is.

"Nie ver hiervandaan nie," grom Moodie toe hulle uitstap in 'n breë straat vol winkels en mense wat in die koue winterlug Kersinkopies doen. Hy stoot Harry voor hom uit en hink agterna. Harry weet die oog onder die skewe hoed hou alles dop. "Was nie maklik om 'n goeie plek vir 'n hospitaal te kry nie. Nie genoeg plek in Diagonaalstraat nie en ons wou dit nie ondergronds bou soos die Ministerie nie – nie gesond nie. Op die ou end het hulle 'n gebou hier bo gekry. Idee is dat siek towenaars vryelik kan kom en gaan en in die skare kan wegsmelt."

Hy gryp Harry se skouer om te keer dat 'n groep mense op pad na 'n winkel vir elektriese toebehore tussen hulle kom.

"Hier is ons," sê Moodie 'n oomblik later.

Hulle staan voor 'n groot, outydse rooibaksteen-afdelingswinkel met die naam Wiggel & Wys Bpk. Die plek lyk verwaarloos en mistroostig, die uitstallings in die vensters bestaan uit 'n paar geklawende winkelpoppe met skewe pruie en klere wat ten minste tien jaar gelede in die mode was. 'n Groot plakkaat teen die stowwerige deur sê: "Gesluit vir opknapping". Harry hoor hoe 'n gesette vrou belaaï met plastiekwinkelsakke in die verbystap vir haar vriendin sê: "Daardie plek is nooit oop nie . . ."

"Goed," sê Tonks en wink hulle na 'n venster waarin 'n besonder lelike vroulike winkelpop alleen staan. Haar vals wimpers sit skeef en sy dra 'n groen voorskootrok van nylon. "Is julle reg?"

Hulle knik en drom om Tonks saam. Moodie gee Harry nog 'n stootjie tussen die blaaië sodat hy nader staan. Tonks leun teen die glas en staar na die lelike pop. Die venster raak vol wasem. "Hallo," sê sy, "ons is hier om vir Arthur Weasley te sien."

Harry dink nog Tonks moet mal wees as sy reken die pop kan haar deur die dik glas hoor as sy so sag praat in 'n straat vol rammelende busse en mense wat inkopies doen. Toe onthou hy dat winkelpoppe in elk geval nie kan hoor nie. Maar sy mond val oop toe die pop effens knik en met haar vinger wink. Tonks gryp Ginny en mevrou Weasley aan die elmboog, tree deur die glas en verdwyn.

Fred, George en Ron volg hulle. Harry loer na die mense in die straat. Dit lyk nie of enige iemand na die lelike uitstallings in Wiggel

& Wys se vensters kyk nie. Niemand het opgelet dat ses mense so pas voor hulle verdwyn het nie.

"Komaan," grom Moodie, druk Harry in die rug en hulle stap saam deur iets wat soos 'n plaat koue water voel, hoewel hulle warm en droog aan die ander kant is.

Daar is nie 'n teken van die lelike winkelpop of die plek waar sy gestaan het nie. Hulle is in 'n stampvol ontvangsarea waar rye hekse en towenaars op lendelam houtstoele sit. Party lyk heeltemal normaal en lees ou eksemplare van *Heks & Haard*, ander het aaklige misvormings soos olifantslurpe of ekstra hande wat uit hulle borskaste steek. Die vertrek is nie juis stiller as die straat daar buite nie, want baie van die pasiënte maak vreemde geluide. 'n Heks met 'n natgeswete gesig in die middel van die voorste ry waai haar met 'n eksemplaar van die *Daaglikse Profeet* koel en fluit elke nou en dan as 'n wolk stoom uit haar mond borrel. 'n Verwaarloosde towenaar in die hoek lui soos 'n klok elke keer dat hy beweeg en sy kop vibreer so erg dat hy sy ore moet vasgryp om dit te laat ophou.

Hekse en towenaars in lemmetjiegroen klede stap heen en weer tussen die rye, vra vrae en maak notas op aanknipborde nes Umbridge s'n. Harry sien die embleem wat op hulle borskaste geborduur is: 'n towerstaf en 'n been wat kruis.

"Is hulle dokters?" vra hy saggies vir Ron.

"Dokters?" sê Ron verbaas. "Daardie mal Moggels wat mense opkerf? Nee, hulle is helers."

"Hierdie kant toe!" roep mevrou Weasley net toe die towenaar in die hoek weer hard lui. Hulle stap saam met haar na 'n ry voor 'n mollige blondine agter 'n toonbank waarop Navrae staan. Teen die muur agter haar is kennisgewings en plaklate waarop goed staan soos: **SKOON HEKSEKETELS = SKOON TOWERDRANKIES WAT NIE GIF WORD NIE** en **TEENMIDDELS IS TEENMOENIES TEN-SY GOEDGEKEUR DEUR 'N GEKWALIFISEERDE HELER**. Daar is ook 'n groot portret van 'n heks met lang silwer krulletjies en die onderskrif:

Dilys Derwent

Heler by Sint Mungo 1722 – 1741

Skoolhoof by Hogwarts Skool vir Heksery en Towerkuns

1741 – 1768

Dilys bekyk die Weasley-gesin met groot belangstelling asof sy hulle tel, en toe Harry haar oog vang, knipoog sy fyntjies en verdwyn dan uit haar portret.

Intussen is 'n jong towenaar voor in die ry besig om 'n vreemde
munt dansie te doen, skynbaar in 'n poging tussen gille van pyn, om
sy verknorsing aan die heks agter die toonbank te verduidelik.

"Dis hierdie – eina – skoene wat my broer vir my gegee het –
Al – hulle vreet my voete – EINA – kyk net, daar moet 'n soort –
AARG – vloek op hulle wees en ek kan – AAAAAAARG – hulle glad
nie uittrek nie." Hy hop van die een voet na die ander asof hy op
warm kole dans.

"Die skoene voorkom nie dat jy kan lees nie, nè?" sê die blonde
heks ongeduldig en wys na 'n groot teken links van die toonbank.
"Jy moet na Towerspreukskade gaan, vierde verdieping. Dit staan
daar op die gids. Volgende!"

Die towenaar hobbels weg en die Weasley-geselskap beweeg 'n
paar tree nader. Harry lees die gids.

ONGELUKKE MET ARTEFAKTE Grondverdieping
*Hekseketelontploffings, towerstlawwe wat
terugskop, besemongelukke, ens.*

WESERINGS WEENS DIERE Eerste verdieping
*Bytwonde en steekplekke, brandwonde, rûe
wat vassit, ens.*

MAGIESE INSEKTE Tweede verdieping
*Aansteeklike siektes, bv. draakpokke, verdwynsiekte,
klierkwale, ens.*

TOWERDRANKIE- EN PLANTVERGIFTIGING .. Derde verdieping
Uitslag, braking, onbeheerbare lagbuie, ens.

TOWERSPREUKSKADE Vierde verdieping
Onomkeerbare vloekte, foutiewe towerspreuke, ens.

BESOEKERSTEEKAMER/HOSPITAALWINKEL .. Vyfde verdieping

INDIEN U ONSEKER IS WAARHEEN OM TE GAAN,
OF NIE NORMAAL KAN PRAAT NIE, OF NIE KAN ONTHOU
WAAROM U HIER IS NIE, SAL ONS ONTVANGSHEKS U MET
GRAAGTE HELP.

'n Baie krom ou towenaar met 'n oortrompet skuifels vorentoe. "Ek
het vir Broderick Bodus kom sien!" sê hy aamborstig.

“Saal 49, maar ek’s bevrees dis tydmors,” sê die heks. “Hy’s heeltemal deurmekaar, dink nog steeds hy’s ’n teepot. Volgende!”

’n Towenaar wat baie ontsteld lyk, hou ’n klein dogtertjie styf aan die enkel vas terwyl sy met enorme swart vlerke wat agter uit haar speelpakkie groei om sy kop fladder.

“Vierde verdieping,” sê die heks in ’n verveelde stem, sonder om iets te vra. Die man verdwyn deur die dubbeldeure langs die toonbank. Die dogtertjie sweef soos ’n eienaardige ballon bo sy kop “Volgende?”

Mevrou Weasley stap nader.

“Hallo,” sê sy, “my man, Arthur Weasley, sou vanoggend na ’n ander saal gegaan het, kan jy vir my sê – ”

“Arthur Weasley?” Die heks trek haar vinger oor die lang lys name voor haar. “Ja, eerste verdieping, tweede deur aan die regterkant, Dai Llewellyn-saal.”

“Dankie,” sê mevrou Weasley. “Kom, julle.”

Hulle volg haar deur die dubbeldeure en in die smal gang af. Dis vol portrette van beroemde helers en word verlig deur kristalborrels vol kerse wat soos reuseseebelle teen die plafon dryf. Nog hekse en towenaars in lemmetjiegroen klede gaan in en uit by die deure waarby hulle verbystap. ’n Sieklike geel gas hang voor een deur en elke nou en dan hoor hulle iemand veraf kerm. Hulle stap met ’n stel trappe op na die gang vir Beserings weens Diere. Teen die tweede deur aan die regterkant staan die woorde: *Gevaar. Dai Llewellyn-saal: Ernstige bytwonde*. Onderaan is ’n kaart in ’n koperhouer waarop met die hand geskryf is: *Heler-in-bevel: Hippokrates Smetwyk. Hulpheler: Augustus Pye*.

“Ons sal buite wag, Molly,” sê Tonks. “Arthur moenie te veel besoekers op een slag kry nie . . . eers net die familie.”

Maloog grom goedkeurend en gaan staan met sy rug teen die muur. Sy toweroog rol woes rond. Harry staan ook opsy, maar mevrou Weasley trek hom binnetoe. “Moenie verspot wees nie, Harry, Arthur wil vir jou dankie sê.”

Die saal is klein en nogal somber. Die enigste venster is smal en sit hoog in die muur regoor die deur. Die meeste van die lig kom van ’n tros kristalborrels in die middel van die plafon. Daar is eikehoutpaneel teen die mure en daar hang ’n portret van ’n towenaar wat nogal kwaai lyk. Die opskrif lees: *Urquhart Rackharrow, 1612 – 1697, Uitvinder van die Dermuitdryfvloek*.

Daar is net drie pasiënte. Meneer Weasley is in die bed aan die oorkant van die saal onder die venstertjie. Harry is verlig toe hy sien dat meneer Weasley teen ’n paar kussings leun en die *Daaglikse*

Profeet in die smal sonligbaan sit en lees. Hy kyk op toe hulle instap en toe hy hulle herken, straal sy gesig.

"Hallo!" roep hy uit en gooi die *Profeet* neer. "Bill is nou net hier weg, Molly, hy moes terug werk toe gaan, maar hy't gesê hy sal later valsklag by julle inloer."

"Hoe voel jy, Arthur?" Mevrouw Weasley buk oor, soen hom op die wang en kyk angstig na sy gesig. "Jy lyk nog steeds baie moeg."

"Ek voel wonderlik," sê meneer Weasley vrolik en steek sy gesonde arm uit om vir Ginny 'n drukkie te gee. "As hulle net die verbande wil afhaal, kan ek huis toe gaan."

"Hoekom haal hulle nie die goed af nie, Pa?" vra Fred.

"Omdat ek vir die vale bloei elke keer dat hulle probeer," sê meneer Weasley vrolik. Hy tel sy towerstaf van sy bedtafeltjie op, waai dit en ses ekstra stoele verskyn langs sy bed. "Die slang het blykbaar die een of ander vreemde gif wat die wonde oophou. Hulle is seker hulle sal 'n teenmiddel kry, hulle sê hulle het al erger gevalle as myne gesien. Intussen moet ek al om die uur 'n Bloedaanvullingsdrankie drink. Maar daardie vent daar oorkant," hy laat sak sy stem terwyl hy wys na 'n man met 'n siek groen kleur wat strak na die plafon staar, "is deur 'n weerwolf gebyt, die arme drommel. Geen teenmiddel nie."

"'n Weerwolf?" prewel mevrou Weasley geskok. "Is hy veilig in 'n openbare saal? Moet hy nie in 'n privaat kamer wees nie?"

"Dis eers oor twee weke volmaan," herinner meneer Weasley haar. "Hulle het vanoggend met hom gepraat, die helers, weet jy, en hom probeer oortuig dat hy nog 'n taamlik normale lewe kan lei. Ek het vir hom gesê – het natuurlik nie name genoem nie – maar ek het vir hom gesê ek ken 'n weerwolf persoonlik, 'n baie gawe man, en dat hy dié toestand met gemak beheer."

"Wat sê hy toe?" vra George.

"Hy't gesê hy gaan my byt as ek nie my snater hou nie," sê meneer Weasley bedruk. "En daardie vrou daar oorkant," hy wys na die bed by die deur, "weier om vir die helers te sê wat haar gebyt het. Ons dink almal sy't iets onwettigs gehanteer. Wat dit ook al was, dit het 'n yslike hap uit haar been gevat, baie nare reuk as hulle die verbande afhaal."

"Gaan Pa nou vir ons vertel wat gebeur het?" vra Fred en trek sy stoel nader.

"Maar julle weet mos reeds," sê meneer Weasley en glimlag betekenisvol vir Harry. "Dis baie eenvoudig – ek het 'n lang dag gehad, aan die slaap geraak, is bekruip en gebyt."

"Is dit in die *Profeet* dat Pa aangeval is?" vra Fred en wys na die koerant wat meneer Weasley eenkant neergesit het.

"Nee, natuurlik nie." Meneer Weasley glimlag effens bitter. "Die Ministerie wil nie hê almal moet weet 'n yslike groot slang het –"

"Arthur!" waarsku mevrou Weasley.

"– hm – my gekry nie," sê meneer Weasley vinnig, hoewel Harry seker is dis nie wat hy van plan was om te sê nie.

"Waar was Pa toe dit gebeur het?" vra George.

"Dis my saak," sê meneer Weasley met 'n klein glimlaggie. Hy tel die *Daaglikse Profeet* op, vou dit oop en sê: "Ek lees nou net hier dat Willy Widdershin in hegtenis geneem is. Hy sit agter verlede somer se terugvloeiende toilette. Een van sy towerspreuke het teruggeskop en die toilet het ontplof. Hy was bewusteloos toe hulle hom kry, toe onder die gemors, van kop tot tone vol –"

"As julle sê julle is 'op diens'," val Fred hom in die rede, "wat beteken dit?"

"Jy't gehoor wat jou pa sê," fluister mevrou Weasley kwaai, "ons kan dit nie hier bespreek nie! Vertel verder oor Willy Widdershin, Arthur."

"Wel, moenie vir my vra hoe hy dit reggekry het nie, maar hy's vrygespreek op die toiletaanklag," sê meneer Weasley grimmig. Al wat ek kan dink, is dat 'n bierjie goud hande geruil het –"

"Julle pas dit op, nè?" sê George sag. "Die wapen? Die ding wat Jy-Weet-Wie wil hê?"

"George, bly still!" snou mevrou Weasley.

"In elk geval," sê meneer Weasley heelwat harder, "hierdie keer is Willy vasgetrek toe hy bytende deurknoppe aan Moggels verkoop het. Ek dink nie hy sal hom weer so maklik kan loswikkell nie. Volgens die artikel het twee Moggels vingers verloor. Hulle is hier iewers in Sint Mungo vir noodbeenhergroeiing en geheue-uitwissing. Dink net, Moggels in Sint Mungo! Ek wonder in watter saal hulle is."

Hy kyk gretig rond asof hy verwag om 'n aanwyser te sien.

"Het jy nie gesê Jy-Weet-Wie het 'n slang nie, Harry?" vra Fred en hou sy pa dop om sy reaksie te sien. "'n Hengse grote? Jy't dit mos gesien die nag toe hy teruggekom het, dan nie?"

"Dis genoeg!" sê mevrou Weasley boos. "Maloog en Tonks is hier buite, Arthur, hulle wil jou ook graag sien. En julle klomp kan buite wag," sê sy vir haar kinders en Harry. "Julle kan agterna kom groet. Uit is julle."

Hulle stap uit in die gang. Maloog en Tonks gaan in en maak die saal se deur agter hulle toe. Fred lig sy wenkbroue.

"Goed," sê hy kil en vroetel in sy sakke, "wees maar so. Moet niks vir ons sê nie."

“Soek jy dit?” George hou ’n klomp gekoekte vleeskleurige drade in die lug.

“Jy lees my gedagtes,” sê Fred en grinnik. “Kom ons kyk of Sint Mungo Onversteurbaarheidspreuke op hulle deure het.”

Hy en George maak die gekoekte drade los en wikkel vyf Verlengbare Ore daaruit en begin dit uitdeel. Harry is huiwerig om een te val.

“Toe nou, Harry, vat dit! Jy’t Pa se lewe gered. As enigiemand die reg het om hulle af te luister, is dit jy.”

Harry glimlag effens, neem een van die drade en druk die punt in sy oor, soos die tweeling gedoen het.

“Weg is ons,” fluister Fred.

Die vleeskleurige drade wikkel soos lang maer wurms onderdeur die deur. Harry kan eers niks hoor nie, maar skrik dan toe hy Tonks so helder hoor fluister asof sy langs hom staan.

“Hulle het die hele area deursoek, maar kon nie die slang kry nie. Dit lyk of hy eenvoudig net verdwyn het nadat hy jou aangeval het, Arthur. Maar Jy-Weet-Wie kon tog nie verwag het ’n slang sal daar inkom nie, kon hy?”

“Ek dink dit was ’n soort spioen wat hy gestuur het,” grom Moodie. “Omdat hy nog niks kon regkry nie. Ek dink hy probeer ’n beter idee kry van dit waarteen hy te staan kom en as Arthur nie daar was nie, sou die dier baie meer tyd gehad het om rond te kyk. So Potter sê hy’t gesien hoe dit gebeur?”

“Ja,” sê mevrou Weasley. Sy klink ongemaklik. “Weet jy, dis of Dompeldorius amper gewag het dat Harry so iets sal sien.”

“Ja, wel,” sê Moodie, “daar is iets snaaks aan die Potter-kind, ons weet dit almal.”

“Dompeldorius het baie bekommerd oor Harry geklink toe ek vanoggend met hom gepraat het,” fluister mevrou Weasley.

“Natuurlik is hy bekommerd,” grom Moodie. “Die seun sien dinge deur Jy-Weet-Wie se slang. Dis duidelik dat Potter nie weet wat dit beteken nie, maar as hy besete is deur Jy-Weet-Wie –”

Harry pluk die Verlengbare Oor vinnig uit sy oor. Sy hart klop vinnig en sy gesig gloei warm. Hy kyk na die ander, wat na hom staan, die toutjies nog steeds in hul ore. Hulle lyk skielik bang.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



CHRISTMAS ON THE CLOSED WARD

Was this why Dumbledore would no longer meet Harry's eyes? Did he expect to see Voldemort staring out of them, afraid, perhaps, that their vivid green might turn suddenly to scarlet, with catlike slits for pupils? Harry remembered how the snakelike face of Voldemort had once forced itself out of the back of Professor Quirrell's head, and he ran his hand over the back of his own, wondering what it would feel like if Voldemort burst out of his skull.

He felt dirty, contaminated, as though he were carrying some deadly germ, unworthy to sit on the underground train back from the

hospital with innocent, clean people whose minds and bodies were free of the taint of Voldemort. . . . He had not merely seen the snake, he had *been* the snake, he knew it now. . . .

And then a truly terrible thought occurred to him, a memory bobbing to the surface of his mind, one that made his insides writhe and squirm like serpents. . . .

“What’s he after apart from followers?”

“Stuff he can only get by stealth . . . like a weapon. Something he didn’t have last time.”

I’m the weapon, Harry thought, and it was as though poison were pumping through his veins, chilling him, bringing him out in a sweat as he swayed with the train through the dark tunnel. I’m the one Voldemort’s trying to use, that’s why they’ve got guards around me everywhere I go, it’s not for my protection, it’s for other people’s, only it’s not working, they can’t have someone on me all the time at Hogwarts. . . . I did attack Mr. Weasley last night, it was me, Voldemort made me do it and he could be inside me, listening to my thoughts right now. . . .

“Are you all right, Harry, dear?” whispered Mrs. Weasley, leaning across Ginny to speak to him as the train rattled along through its dark tunnel. “You don’t look very well. Are you feeling sick?”

They were all watching him. He shook his head violently and stared up at an advertisement for home insurance.

“Harry, dear, are you *sure* you’re all right?” said Mrs. Weasley in a worried voice, as they walked around the unkempt patch of grass in the middle of Grimmauld Place. “You look ever so pale. . . . Are you sure you slept this morning? You go upstairs to bed right now, and

you can have a couple of hours' sleep before dinner, all right?"

He nodded; here was a ready-made excuse not to talk to any of the others, which was precisely what he wanted, so when she opened the front door he proceeded straight past the troll's leg umbrella stand and up the stairs and hurried into his and Ron's bedroom.

Here he began to pace up and down, past the two beds and Phineas Nigellus's empty portrait, his brain teeming and seething with questions and ever more dreadful ideas. . . .

How had he become a snake? Perhaps he was an Animagus. . . . No, he couldn't be, he would know. . . . perhaps *Voldemort* was an Animagus. . . . Yes, thought Harry, *that would fit, he would turn into a snake of course . . . and when he's possessing me, then we both transform. . . . That still doesn't explain how come I got to London and back to my bed in the space of about five minutes, though. . . . But then Voldemort's about the most powerful wizard in the world, apart from Dumbledore, it's probably no problem at all to him to transport people like that. . . .*

And then, with a terrible stab of panic he thought, *but this is insane — if Voldemort's possessing me, I'm giving him a clear view into the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix right now! He'll know who's in the Order and where Sirius is . . . and I've heard loads of stuff I shouldn't have, everything Sirius told me the first night I was here. . . .*

There was only one thing for it: He would have to leave Grimmauld Place straightaway. He would spend Christmas at Hogwarts without the others, which would keep them safe over the holidays at least. . . . But no, that wouldn't do, there were still plenty

of people at Hogwarts to maim and injure, what if it was Seamus, Dean, or Neville next time? He stopped his pacing and stood staring at Phineas Nigellus's empty frame. A leaden sensation was settling in the pit of his stomach. He had no alternative: He was going to have to return to Privet Drive, cut himself off from other wizards entirely.

Well, if he had to do it, he thought, there was no point hanging around. Trying with all his might not to think how the Dursleys were going to react when they found him on their doorstep six months earlier than they had expected, he strode over to his trunk, slammed the lid shut and locked it, then glanced around automatically for Hedwig before remembering that she was still at Hogwarts — well, her cage would be one less thing to carry — he seized one end of his trunk and had dragged it halfway toward the door when a sneaky voice said, “Running away, are we?”

He looked around. Phineas Nigellus had appeared upon the canvas of his portrait and was leaning against the frame, watching Harry with an amused expression on his face.

“Not running away, no,” said Harry shortly, dragging his trunk a few more feet across the room.

“I thought,” said Phineas Nigellus, stroking his pointed beard, “that to belong in Gryffindor House you were supposed to be *brave*? It looks to me as though you would have been better off in my own House. We Slytherins are brave, yes, but not stupid. For instance, given the choice, we will always choose to save our own necks.”

“It’s not my own neck I’m saving,” said Harry tersely, tugging the trunk over a patch of particularly uneven, moth-eaten carpet right in front of the door.

“Oh I *see*,” said Phineas Nigellus, still stroking his beard. “This is no cowardly flight — you are being *noble*.”

Harry ignored him. His hand was on the doorknob when Phineas Nigellus said lazily, “I have a message for you from Albus Dumbledore.”

Harry spun around.

“What is it?”

“Stay where you are.”

“I haven’t moved!” said Harry, his hand still upon the doorknob. “So what’s the message?”

“I have just given it to you, dolt,” said Phineas Nigellus smoothly. “Dumbledore says, ‘*Stay where you are.*’”

“Why?” said Harry eagerly, dropping the end of his trunk. “Why does he want me to stay? What else did he say?”

“Nothing whatsoever,” said Phineas Nigellus, raising a thin black eyebrow as though he found Harry impertinent.

Harry’s temper rose to the surface like a snake rearing from long grass. He was exhausted, he was confused beyond measure, he had experienced terror, relief, and then terror again in the last twelve hours, and still Dumbledore did not want to talk to him!

“So that’s it, is it?” he said loudly. “*Stay there?* That’s all anyone could tell me after I got attacked by those dementors too! Just stay put while the grown-ups sort it out, Harry! We won’t bother telling you anything, though, because your tiny little brain might not be able to cope with it!”

“You know,” said Phineas Nigellus, even more loudly than Harry, “this is precisely why I *loathed* being a teacher! Young people are so

infernally convinced that they are absolutely right about everything. Has it not occurred to you, my poor puffed-up popinjay, that there might be an excellent reason why the headmaster of Hogwarts is not confiding every tiny detail of his plans to you? Have you never paused, while feeling hard-done-by, to note that following Dumbledore's orders has never yet led you into harm? No. No, like all young people, you are quite sure that you alone feel and think, you alone recognize danger, you alone are the only one clever enough to realize what the Dark Lord may be planning . . . ”

“He *is* planning something to do with me, then?” said Harry swiftly.

“Did I say that?” said Phineas Nigellus, idly examining his silk gloves. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have better things to do than to listen to adolescent agonizing. . . . Good day to you . . . ”

And he strolled into his frame and out of sight.

“Fine, go then!” Harry bellowed at the empty frame. “And tell Dumbledore thanks for nothing!”

The empty canvas remained silent. Fuming, Harry dragged his trunk back to the foot of his bed, then threw himself facedown upon the moth-eaten covers, his eyes shut, his body heavy and aching. . . .

He felt he had journeyed miles and miles. . . . It seemed impossible that less than twenty-four hours ago Cho Chang had been approaching him under the mistletoe. . . . He was so tired. . . . He was scared to sleep. . . . yet he did not know how long he could fight it. . . . Dumbledore had told him to stay. . . . That must mean he was allowed to sleep. . . . But he was scared. . . . What if it happened again . . . ?

He was sinking into shadows. . . .

It was as though a film in his head had been waiting to start. He was walking down a deserted corridor toward a plain black door, past rough stone walls, torches, and an open doorway onto a flight of stone steps leading downstairs on the left. . . .

He reached the black door but could not open it. . . . He stood gazing at it, desperate for entry. . . . Something he wanted with all his heart lay beyond. . . . A prize beyond his dreams. . . . If only his scar would stop prickling . . . then he would be able to think more clearly . . .

"Harry," said Ron's voice, from far, far away, "Mum says dinner's ready, but she'll save you something if you want to stay in bed. . . ."

Harry opened his eyes, but Ron had already left the room.

He doesn't want to be on his own with me, Harry thought. *Not after what he heard Moody say. . . .*

He supposed none of them would want him there anymore now that they knew what was inside him. . . .

He would not go down to dinner; he would not inflict his company upon them. He turned over onto his other side and after a while dropped back off to sleep, waking much later in the early hours of the morning, with his insides aching with hunger, and Ron snoring in the next bed. Squinting around the room he saw the dark outline of Phineas Nigellus standing again in his portrait and it occurred to Harry that Dumbledore had probably set Phineas Nigellus to watch over him, in case he attacked somebody else.

The feeling of being unclean intensified. He half wished he had not obeyed Dumbledore and stayed. . . . If this was how life was going to

be in Grimmauld Place from now on, maybe he would be better off in Privet Drive after all.

Everybody else spent the following morning putting up Christmas decorations. Harry could not remember Sirius ever being in such a good mood; he was actually singing carols, apparently delighted that he was to have company over Christmas. Harry could hear his voice echoing up through the floor in the cold and empty drawing room where he was sitting alone, watching the sky outside the windows growing whiter, threatening snow, all the time feeling a savage pleasure that he was giving the others the opportunity to keep talking about him, as they were bound to be doing. When he heard Mrs. Weasley calling his name softly up the stairs around lunchtime he retreated farther upstairs and ignored her.

It was around six o'clock in the evening that the doorbell rang and Mrs. Black started screaming again. Assuming that Mundungus or some other Order member had come to call, Harry merely settled himself more comfortably against the wall of Buckbeak the hippogriff's room where he was hiding, trying to ignore how hungry he felt as he fed Buckbeak dead rats. It came as a slight shock when somebody hammered hard on the door a few minutes later.

"I know you're in there," said Hermione's voice. "Will you please come out? I want to talk to you."

"What are *you* doing here?" Harry asked her, pulling open the door, as Buckbeak resumed his scratching at the straw-strewn floor for any fragments of rat he might have dropped. "I thought you were skiing with your mum and dad."

“Well, to tell the truth, skiing’s not *really* my thing,” said Hermione. “So I’ve come for Christmas.” There was snow in her hair and her face was pink with cold. “But don’t tell Ron that, I told him it’s really good because he kept laughing so much. Anyway, Mum and Dad are a bit disappointed, but I’ve told them that everyone who’s serious about the exams is staying at Hogwarts to study. They want me to do well, they’ll understand. Anyway,” she said briskly, “let’s go to your bedroom, Ron’s mum’s lit a fire in there and she’s sent up sandwiches.”

Harry followed her back to the second floor. When he entered the bedroom he was rather surprised to see both Ron and Ginny waiting for them, sitting on Ron’s bed.

“I came on the Knight Bus,” said Hermione airily, pulling off her jacket before Harry had time to speak. “Dumbledore told me what had happened first thing yesterday morning, but I had to wait for term to end officially before setting off. Umbridge is already livid that you lot disappeared right under her nose, even though Dumbledore told her Mr. Weasley was in St. Mungo’s, and he’d given you all permission to visit. So . . .”

She sat down next to Ginny, and the two girls and Ron looked up at Harry.

“How’re you feeling?” asked Hermione.

“Fine,” said Harry stiffly.

“Oh, don’t lie, Harry,” she said impatiently. “Ron and Ginny say you’ve been hiding from everyone since you got back from St. Mungo’s.”

“They do, do they?” said Harry, glaring at Ron and Ginny. Ron

looked down at his feet but Ginny seemed quite unabashed.

“Well, you have!” she said. “And you won’t look at any of us!”

“It’s you lot who won’t look at me!” said Harry angrily.

“Maybe you’re taking it in turns to look and keep missing each other,” suggested Hermione, the corners of her mouth twitching.

“Very funny,” snapped Harry, turning away.

“Oh, stop feeling all misunderstood,” said Hermione sharply. “Look, the others have told me what you overheard last night on the Extendable Ears —”

“Yeah?” growled Harry, his hands deep in his pockets as he watched the snow now falling thickly outside. “All been talking about me, have you? Well, I’m getting used to it . . .”

“We wanted to talk *to you*, Harry,” said Ginny, “but as you’ve been hiding ever since we got back —”

“I didn’t want anyone to talk to me,” said Harry, who was feeling more and more nettled.

“Well, that was a bit stupid of you,” said Ginny angrily, “seeing as you don’t know anyone but me who’s been possessed by You-Know-Who, and I can tell you how it feels.”

Harry remained quite still as the impact of these words hit him. Then he turned on the spot to face her.

“I forgot,” he said.

“Lucky you,” said Ginny coolly.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, and he meant it. “So . . . so do you think I’m being possessed, then?”

“Well, can you remember everything you’ve been doing?” Ginny

asked. "Are there big blank periods where you don't know what you've been up to?"

Harry racked his brains.

"No," he said.

"Then You-Know-Who hasn't ever possessed you," said Ginny simply. "When he did it to me, I couldn't remember what I'd been doing for hours at a time. I'd find myself somewhere and not know how I got there."

Harry hardly dared believe her, yet his heart was lightening almost in spite of himself.

"That dream I had about your dad and the snake, though —"

"Harry, you've had these dreams before," Hermione said. "You had flashes of what Voldemort was up to last year."

"This was different," said Harry, shaking his head. "I was inside that snake. It was like I *was* the snake. . . . What if Voldemort somehow transported me to London — ?"

"One day," said Hermione, sounding thoroughly exasperated. "you'll read *Hogwarts: A History*, and perhaps that will remind you that you can't Apparate or Disapparate inside Hogwarts. Even Voldemort couldn't just make you fly out of your dormitory, Harry."

"You didn't leave your bed, mate," said Ron. "I saw you thrashing around in your sleep about a minute before we could wake you up . . ."

Harry started pacing up and down the room again, thinking. What they were all saying was not only comforting, it made sense. Without really thinking he took a sandwich from the plate on the bed and crammed it hungrily into his mouth. . . .

I'm not the weapon after all, thought Harry. His heart swelled with happiness and relief, and he felt like joining in as they heard Sirius tramping past their door toward Buckbeak's room, singing "God Rest Ye Merry, Hippogriffs" at the top of his voice.

How could he have dreamed of returning to Privet Drive for Christmas? Sirius's delight at having the house full again, and especially at having Harry back, was infectious. He was no longer their sullen host of the summer; now he seemed determined that everyone should enjoy themselves as much, if not more, than they would have done at Hogwarts, and he worked tirelessly in the run-up to Christmas Day, cleaning and decorating with their help, so that by the time they all went to bed on Christmas Eve the house was barely recognizable. The tarnished chandeliers were no longer hung with cobwebs but with garlands of holly and gold and silver streamers; magical snow glittered in heaps over the threadbare carpets; a great Christmas tree, obtained by Mundungus and decorated with live fairies, blocked Sirius's family tree from view; and even the stuffed elf heads on the hall wall wore Father Christmas hats and beards.

Harry awoke on Christmas morning to find a stack of presents at the foot of his bed and Ron already halfway through opening his own, rather larger, pile.

"Good haul this year," he informed Harry through a cloud of paper. "Thanks for the Broom Compass, it's excellent, beats Hermione's — she's got me a *homework planner* —"

Harry sorted through his presents and found one with Hermione's handwriting on it. She had given him too a book that resembled a

diary, except that it said things like “*Do it today or later you’ll pay!*” every time he opened a page.

Sirius and Lupin had given Harry a set of excellent books entitled *Practical Defensive Magic and Its Use Against the Dark Arts*, which had superb, moving color illustrations of all the counterjinxes and hexes it described. Harry flicked through the first volume eagerly; he could see it was going to be highly useful in his plans for the D.A. Hagrid had sent a furry brown wallet that had fangs, which were presumably supposed to be an antitheft device, but unfortunately prevented Harry putting any money in without getting his fingers ripped off. Tonks’s present was a small, working model of a Firebolt, which Harry watched fly around the room, wishing he still had his full-size version; Ron had given him an enormous box of Every-Flavor Beans; Mr. and Mrs. Weasley the usual hand-knitted jumper and some mince pies; and Dobby, a truly dreadful painting that Harry suspected had been done by the elf himself. He had just turned it upside down to see whether it looked better that way when, with a loud *crack*, Fred and George Apparated at the foot of his bed.

“Merry Christmas,” said George. “Don’t go downstairs for a bit.”

“Why not?” said Ron.

“Mum’s crying again,” said Fred heavily. “Percy sent back his Christmas jumper.”

“Without a note,” added George. “Hasn’t asked how Dad is or visited him or anything . . .”

“We tried to comfort her,” said Fred, moving around the bed to look at Harry’s portrait. “Told her Percy’s nothing more than a humongous pile of rat droppings —”

“— didn’t work,” said George, helping himself to a Chocolate Frog. “So Lupin took over. Best let him cheer her up before we go down for breakfast, I reckon.”

“What’s that supposed to be anyway?” asked Fred, squinting at Dobby’s painting. “Looks like a gibbon with two black eyes.”

“It’s Harry!” said George, pointing at the back of the picture. “Says so on the back!”

“Good likeness,” said Fred, grinning. Harry threw his new homework diary at him; it hit the wall opposite and fell to the floor where it said happily, “*If you’ve dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s then you may do whatever you please!*”

They got up and dressed; they could hear various inhabitants of the house calling “Merry Christmas” to each other. On their way downstairs they met Hermione. “Thanks for the book, Harry!” she said happily. “I’ve been wanting that *New Theory of Numerology* for ages! And that perfume is really unusual, Ron.”

“No problem,” said Ron. “Who’s that for anyway?” he added, nodding at the neatly wrapped present she was carrying.

“Kreacher,” said Hermione brightly.

“It had better not be clothes!” said Ron warningly. “You know what Sirius said, Kreacher knows too much, we can’t set him free!”

“It isn’t clothes,” said Hermione, “although if I had my way I’d certainly give him something to wear other than that filthy old rag. No, it’s a patchwork quilt. I thought it would brighten up his bedroom.”

“What bedroom?” said Harry, dropping his voice to a whisper as they were passing the portrait of Sirius’s mother.

"Well, Sirius says it's not so much a bedroom, more a kind of — *den*," said Hermione. "Apparently he sleeps under the boiler in that cupboard off the kitchen."

Mrs. Weasley was the only person in the basement when they arrived there. She was standing at the stove and sounded as though she had a bad head cold when she wished them Merry Christmas, and they all averted their eyes.

"So, this is Kreacher's bedroom?" said Ron, strolling over to a dingy door in the corner opposite the pantry which Harry had never seen open.

"Yes," said Hermione, now sounding a little nervous. "Er . . . I think we'd better knock . . ."

Ron rapped the door with his knuckles but there was no reply.

"He must be sneaking around upstairs," he said, and without further ado pulled open the door. "*Urgh*."

Harry peered inside. Most of the cupboard was taken up with a very large and old-fashioned boiler, but in the foot's space underneath the pipes Kreacher had made himself something that looked like a nest. A jumble of assorted rags and smelly old blankets were piled on the floor and the small dent in the middle of it showed where Kreacher curled up to sleep every night. Here and there among the material were stale bread crusts and moldy old bits of cheese. In a far corner glinted small objects and coins that Harry guessed Kreacher had saved, magpielike, from Sirius's purge of the house, and he had also managed to retrieve the silver-framed family photographs that Sirius had thrown away over the summer. Their glass might be shattered, but still the little black-and-white people

inside them peered haughtily up at him, including — he felt a little jolt in his stomach — the dark, heavy-lidded woman whose trial he had witnessed in Dumbledore's Pensieve: Bellatrix Lestrange. By the looks of it, hers was Kreacher's favorite photograph; he had placed it to the fore of all the others and had mended the glass clumsily with Spellotape.

"I think I'll just leave his present here," said Hermione, laying the package neatly in the middle of the depression in the rags and blankets and closing the door quietly. "He'll find it later, that'll be fine . . ."

"Come to think of it," said Sirius, emerging from the pantry carrying a large turkey as they closed the cupboard door, "has anyone actually seen Kreacher lately?"

"I haven't seen him since the night we came back here," said Harry. "You were ordering him out of the kitchen."

"Yeah . . ." said Sirius, frowning. "You know, I think that's the last time I saw him, too. . . . He must be hiding upstairs somewhere . . ."

"He couldn't have left, could he?" said Harry. "I mean, when you said 'out,' maybe he thought you meant, get out of the house?"

"No, no, house-elves can't leave unless they're given clothes, they're tied to their family's house," said Sirius.

"They can leave the house if they really want to," Harry contradicted him. "Dobby did, he left the Malfoys' to give me warnings three years ago. He had to punish himself afterward, but he still managed it."

Sirius looked slightly disconcerted for a moment, then said, "I'll look for him later, I expect I'll find him upstairs crying his eyes out

over my mother's old bloomers or something. . . . Of course, he might have crawled into the airing cupboard and died. . . . But I mustn't get my hopes up . . . ”

Fred, George, and Ron laughed; Hermione, however, looked reproachful.

Once they had had their Christmas lunch, the Weasleys and Harry and Hermione were planning to pay Mr. Weasley another visit, escorted by Mad-Eye and Lupin. Mundungus turned up in time for Christmas pudding and trifle, having managed to “borrow” a car for the occasion, as the Underground did not run on Christmas Day. The car, which Harry doubted very much had been taken with the knowledge or consent of its owner, had had a similar Enlarging Spell put upon it as the Weasleys' old Ford Anglia; although normally proportioned outside, ten people with Mundungus driving were able to fit into it quite comfortably. Mrs. Weasley hesitated at the point of getting inside; Harry knew that her disapproval of Mundungus was battling with her dislike of traveling without magic; finally the cold outside and her children's pleading triumphed, and she settled herself into the backseat between Fred and Bill with good grace.

The journey to St. Mungo's was quite quick, as there was very little traffic on the roads. A small trickle of witches and wizards were creeping furtively up the otherwise deserted street to visit the hospital. Harry and the others got out of the car, and Mundungus drove off around the corner to wait for them; they strolled casually toward the window where the dummy in green nylon stood, then, one by one, stepped through the glass.

The reception area looked pleasantly festive: The crystal orbs that

illuminated St. Mungo's had been turned to red and gold so that they became gigantic, glowing Christmas baubles; holly hung around every doorway, and shining white Christmas trees covered in magical snow and icicles glittered in every corner, each topped with a gleaming gold star. It was less crowded than the last time they had been there, although halfway across the room Harry found himself shunted aside by a witch with a walnut jammed up her left nostril.

"Family argument, eh?" smirked the blonde witch behind the desk. "You're the third I've seen today . . . Spell Damage, fourth floor . . ."

They found Mr. Weasley propped up in bed with the remains of his turkey dinner on a tray in his lap and a rather sheepish expression on his face.

"Everything all right, Arthur?" asked Mrs. Weasley, after they had all greeted Mr. Weasley and handed over their presents.

"Fine, fine," said Mr. Weasley, a little too heartily. "You — er — haven't seen Healer Smethwyck, have you?"

"No," said Mrs. Weasley suspiciously, "why?"

"Nothing, nothing," said Mr. Weasley airily, starting to unwrap his pile of gifts. "Well, everyone had a good day? What did you all get for Christmas? Oh, *Harry* — this is absolutely *wonderful* —"

For he had just opened Harry's gift of fuse-wire and screwdrivers. Mrs. Weasley did not seem entirely satisfied with Mr. Weasley's answer. As her husband leaned over to shake Harry's hand, she peered at the bandaging under his nightshirt.

"Arthur," she said, with a snap in her voice like a mousetrap, "you've had your bandages changed. Why have you had your bandages changed a day early, Arthur? They told me they wouldn't

need doing until tomorrow.”

“What?” said Mr. Weasley, looking rather frightened and pulling the bed covers higher up his chest. “No, no — it’s nothing — it’s — I —”

He seemed to deflate under Mrs. Weasley’s piercing gaze.

“Well — now don’t get upset, Molly, but Augustus Pye had an idea. . . . He’s the Trainee Healer, you know, lovely young chap and very interested in . . . um . . . complementary medicine. . . . I mean, some of these old Muggle remedies . . . well, they’re called *stitches*, Molly, and they work very well on — on Muggle wounds —”

Mrs. Weasley let out an ominous noise somewhere between a shriek and a snarl. Lupin strolled away from the bed and over to the werewolf, who had no visitors and was looking rather wistfully at the crowd around Mr. Weasley; Bill muttered something about getting himself a cup of tea and Fred and George leapt up to accompany him, grinning.

“Do you mean to tell me,” said Mrs. Weasley, her voice growing louder with every word and apparently unaware that her fellow visitors were scurrying for cover, “that you have been messing about with Muggle remedies?”

“Not messing about, Molly, dear,” said Mr. Weasley imploringly. “It was just — just something Pye and I thought we’d try — only, most unfortunately — well, with these particular kinds of wounds — it doesn’t seem to work as well as we’d hoped —”

“*Meaning?*”

“Well . . . well, I don’t know whether you know what — what stitches are?”

“It sounds as though you’ve been trying to sew your skin back together,” said Mrs. Weasley with a snort of mirthless laughter, “but even you, Arthur, wouldn’t be *that* stupid —”

“I fancy a cup of tea too,” said Harry, jumping to his feet.

Hermione, Ron, and Ginny almost sprinted to the door with him. As it swung closed behind them, they heard Mrs. Weasley shriek, “WHAT DO YOU MEAN, THAT’S THE GENERAL IDEA?”

“Typical Dad,” said Ginny, shaking her head as they set off up the corridor. “Stitches . . . I ask you . . .”

“Well, you know, they do work well on non-magical wounds,” said Hermione fairly. “I suppose something in that snake’s venom dissolves them or something. . . . I wonder where the tearoom is?”

“Fifth floor,” said Harry, remembering the sign over the Welcome Witch’s desk.

They walked along the corridor through a set of double doors and found a rickety staircase lined with more portraits of brutal-looking Healers. As they climbed it, the various Healers called out to them, diagnosing odd complaints and suggesting horrible remedies. Ron was seriously affronted when a medieval wizard called out that he clearly had a bad case of spattergroit.

“And what’s that supposed to be?” he asked angrily, as the Healer pursued him through six more portraits, shoving the occupants out of the way.

“’Tis a most grievous affliction of the skin, young master, that will leave you pockmarked and more gruesome even than you are now —”

“Watch who you’re calling gruesome!” said Ron, his ears turning

red.

“The only remedy is to take the liver of a toad, bind it tight about your throat, stand naked by the full moon in a barrel of eels’ eyes —”

“I have not got spattergroit!”

“But the unsightly blemishes upon your visage, young master —”

“They’re freckles!” said Ron furiously. “Now get back in your own picture and leave me alone!”

He rounded on the others, who were all keeping determinedly straight faces.

“What floor’s this?”

“I think it’s the fifth,” said Hermione.

“Nah, it’s the fourth,” said Harry, “one more —”

But as he stepped onto the landing he came to an abrupt halt, staring at the small window set into the double doors that marked the start of a corridor signposted SPELL DAMAGE. A man was peering out at them all with his nose pressed against the glass. He had wavy blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a broad vacant smile that revealed dazzlingly white teeth.

“Blimey!” said Ron, also staring at the man.

“Oh my goodness,” said Hermione suddenly, sounding breathless. “Professor Lockhart!”

Their ex-Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher pushed open the doors and moved toward them, wearing a long lilac dressing gown.

“Well, hello there!” he said. “I expect you’d like my autograph, would you?”

“Hasn’t changed much, has he?” Harry muttered to Ginny, who

grinned.

“Er — how are you, Professor?” said Ron, sounding slightly guilty. It had been Ron’s malfunctioning wand that had damaged Professor Lockhart’s memory so badly that he had landed here in the first place, though, as Lockhart had been attempting to permanently wipe Harry and Ron’s memories at the time, Harry’s sympathy was limited.

“I’m very well indeed, thank you!” said Lockhart exuberantly, pulling a rather battered peacock-feather quill from his pocket. “Now, how many autographs would you like? I can do joined-up writing now, you know!”

“Er — we don’t want any at the moment, thanks,” said Ron, raising his eyebrows at Harry, who asked, “Professor, should you be wandering around the corridors? Shouldn’t you be in a ward?”

The smile faded slowly from Lockhart’s face. For a few moments he gazed intently at Harry, then he said, “Haven’t we met?”

“Er . . . yeah, we have,” said Harry. “You used to teach us at Hogwarts, remember?”

“Teach?” repeated Lockhart, looking faintly unsettled. “Me? Did I?”

And then the smile reappeared upon his face so suddenly it was rather alarming. “Taught you everything you know, I expect, did I? Well, how about those autographs, then? Shall we say a round dozen, you can give them to all your little friends then and nobody will be left out!”

But just then a head poked out of a door at the far end of the corridor and a voice said, “Gilderoy, you naughty boy, where have

you wandered off to?"

A motherly looking Healer wearing a tinsel wreath in her hair came bustling up the corridor, smiling warmly at Harry and the others.

"Oh Gilderoy, you've got visitors! How *lovely*, and on Christmas Day too! Do you know, he *never* gets visitors, poor lamb, and I can't think why, he's such a sweetie, aren't you?"

"We're doing autographs!" Gilderoy told the Healer with another glittering smile. "They want loads of them, won't take no for an answer! I just hope we've got enough photographs!"

"Listen to him," said the Healer, taking Lockhart's arm and beaming fondly at him as though he were a precocious two-year-old. "He was rather well known a few years ago; we very much hope that this liking for giving autographs is a sign that his memory might be coming back a little bit. Will you step this way? He's in a closed ward, you know, he must have slipped out while I was bringing in the Christmas presents, the door's usually kept locked . . . not that he's dangerous! But," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "bit of a danger to himself, bless him. . . . Doesn't know who he is, you see, wanders off and can't remember how to get back. . . . It *is* nice of you to have come to see him —"

"Er," said Ron, gesturing uselessly at the floor above, "actually, we were just — er —"

But the Healer was smiling expectantly at them, and Ron's feeble mutter of "going to have a cup of tea" trailed away into nothingness. They looked at one another rather hopelessly and then followed Lockhart and his Healer along the corridor.

“Let’s not stay long,” Ron said quietly.

The Healer pointed her wand at the door of the Janus Thickety ward and muttered “*Alohomora*.” The door swung open and she led the way inside, keeping a firm grasp on Gilderoy’s arm until she had settled him into an armchair beside his bed.

“This is our long-term resident ward,” she informed Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny in a low voice. “For permanent spell damage, you know. Of course, with intensive remedial potions and charms and a bit of luck, we can produce some improvement. . . . Gilderoy does seem to be getting back some sense of himself, and we’ve seen a real improvement in Mr. Bode, he seems to be regaining the power of speech very well, though he isn’t speaking any language we recognize yet. . . . Well, I must finish giving out the Christmas presents, I’ll leave you all to chat. . . .”

Harry looked around; this ward bore unmistakable signs of being a permanent home to its residents. They had many more personal effects around their beds than in Mr. Weasley’s ward; the wall around Gilderoy’s headboard, for instance, was papered with pictures of himself, all beaming toothily and waving at the new arrivals. He had autographed many of them to himself in disjointed, childish writing. The moment he had been deposited in his chair by the Healer, Gilderoy pulled a fresh stack of photographs toward him, seized a quill, and started signing them all feverishly.

“You can put them in envelopes,” he said to Ginny, throwing the signed pictures into her lap one by one as he finished them. “I am not forgotten, you know, no, I still receive a very great deal of fan mail. . . . Gladys Gudgeon writes *weekly*. . . . I just wish I knew

why . . .” He paused, looking faintly puzzled, then beamed again and returned to his signing with renewed vigor. “I suspect it is simply my good looks . . .”

A sallow-skinned, mournful-looking wizard lay in the bed opposite, staring at the ceiling; he was mumbling to himself and seemed quite unaware of anything around him. Two beds along was a woman whose entire head was covered in fur; Harry remembered something similar happening to Hermione during their second year, although fortunately the damage, in her case, had not been permanent. At the far end of the ward flowery curtains had been drawn around two beds to give the occupants and their visitors some privacy.

“Here you are, Agnes,” said the Healer brightly to the furry-faced woman, handing her a small pile of Christmas presents. “See, not forgotten, are you? And your son’s sent an owl to say he’s visiting tonight, so that’s nice, isn’t it?”

Agnes gave several loud barks.

“And look, Broderick, you’ve been sent a potted plant and a lovely calendar with a different fancy hippogriff for each month, they’ll brighten things up, won’t they?” said the Healer, bustling along to the mumbling man, setting a rather ugly plant with long, swaying tentacles on the bedside cabinet and fixing the calendar to the wall with her wand. “And — oh, Mrs. Longbottom, are you leaving already?”

Harry’s head spun round. The curtains had been drawn back from the two beds at the end of the ward and two visitors were walking back down the aisle between the beds: a formidable-looking old witch wearing a long green dress, a moth-eaten fox fur, and a pointed

hat decorated with what was unmistakably a stuffed vulture and, trailing behind her looking thoroughly depressed — *Neville*.

With a sudden rush of understanding, Harry realized who the people in the end beds must be. He cast around wildly for some means of distracting the others so that Neville could leave the ward unnoticed and unquestioned, but Ron had looked up at the sound of the name “Longbottom” too, and before Harry could stop him had called, “*Neville!*”

Neville jumped and cowered as though a bullet had narrowly missed him.

“It’s us, Neville!” said Ron brightly, getting to his feet. “Have you seen? Lockhart’s here! Who’ve you been visiting?”

“Friends of yours, Neville, dear?” said Neville’s grandmother graciously, bearing down upon them all.

Neville looked as though he would rather be anywhere in the world but here. A dull purple flush was creeping up his plump face and he was not making eye contact with any of them.

“Ah, yes,” said his grandmother, peering at Harry and sticking out a shriveled, clawlike hand for him to shake. “Yes, yes, I know who you are, of course. Neville speaks most highly of you.”

“Er — thanks,” said Harry, shaking hands. Neville did not look at him, but stared at his own feet, the color deepening in his face all the while.

“And you two are clearly Weasleys,” Mrs. Longbottom continued, proffering her hand regally to Ron and Ginny in turn. “Yes, I know your parents — not well, of course — but fine people, fine people . . . and you must be Hermione Granger?”

Hermione looked rather startled that Mrs. Longbottom knew her name, but shook hands all the same.

“Yes, Neville’s told me all about you. Helped him out of a few sticky spots, haven’t you? He’s a good boy,” she said, casting a sternly appraising look down her rather bony nose at Neville, “but he hasn’t got his father’s talent, I’m afraid to say . . .” And she jerked her head in the direction of the two beds at the end of the ward, so that the stuffed vulture on her hat trembled alarmingly.

“What?” said Ron, looking amazed (Harry wanted to stamp on Ron’s foot, but that sort of thing was much harder to bring off unnoticed when you were wearing jeans rather than robes). “Is that your *dad* down the end, Neville?”

“What’s this?” said Mrs. Longbottom sharply. “Haven’t you told your friends about your parents, Neville?”

Neville took a deep breath, looked up at the ceiling, and shook his head. Harry could not remember ever feeling sorrier for anyone, but he could not think of any way of helping Neville out of the situation.

“Well, it’s nothing to be ashamed of!” said Mrs. Longbottom angrily. “You should be *proud*, Neville, *proud*! They didn’t give their health and their sanity so their only son would be ashamed of them, you know!”

“I’m not ashamed,” said Neville very faintly, still looking anywhere but at Harry and the others. Ron was now standing on tiptoe to look over at the inhabitants of the two beds.

“Well, you’ve got a funny way of showing it!” said Mrs. Longbottom. “My son and his wife,” she said, turning haughtily to Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, “were tortured into insanity by

You-Know-Who's followers."

Hermione and Ginny both clapped their hands over their mouths. Ron stopped craning his neck to catch a glimpse of Neville's parents and looked mortified.

"They were Aurors, you know, and very well respected within the Wizarding community," Mrs. Longbottom went on. "Highly gifted, the pair of them. I — yes, Alice dear, what is it?"

Neville's mother had come edging down the ward in her nightdress. She no longer had the plump, happy-looking face Harry had seen in Moody's old photograph of the original Order of the Phoenix. Her face was thin and worn now, her eyes seemed overlarge, and her hair, which had turned white, was wispy and dead-looking. She did not seem to want to speak, or perhaps she was not able to, but she made timid motions toward Neville, holding something in her outstretched hand.

"Again?" said Mrs. Longbottom, sounding slightly weary. "Very well, Alice dear, very well — Neville, take it, whatever it is . . ."

But Neville had already stretched out his hand, into which his mother dropped an empty Drooble's Blowing Gum wrapper.

"Very nice, dear," said Neville's grandmother in a falsely cheery voice, patting his mother on the shoulder. But Neville said quietly, "Thanks Mum."

His mother tottered away, back up the ward, humming to herself. Neville looked around at the others, his expression defiant, as though daring them to laugh, but Harry did not think he'd ever found anything less funny in his life.

"Well, we'd better get back," sighed Mrs. Longbottom, drawing on

long green gloves. "Very nice to have met you all! Neville, put that wrapper in the bin, she must have given you enough of them to paper your bedroom by now . . ."

But as they left, Harry was sure he saw Neville slip the wrapper into his pocket.

The door closed behind them.

"I never knew," said Hermione, who looked tearful.

"Nor did I," said Ron rather hoarsely.

"Nor me," whispered Ginny.

They all looked at Harry.

"I did," he said glumly. "Dumbledore told me but I promised I wouldn't mention it . . . that's what Bellatrix Lestrange got sent to Azkaban for, using the Cruciatus Curse on Neville's parents until they lost their minds."

"Bellatrix Lestrange did that?" whispered Hermione, horrified. "That woman Kreacher's got a photo of in his den?"

There was a long silence, broken by Lockhart's angry voice. "Look, I didn't learn joined-up writing for nothing, you know!"

Kersfees in die geslote saal

Is dit hoekom Dompeldorius nie meer vir Harry in die oë kan kyk nie? Verwag hy dat Woldemort deur sy oë na hom gaan staar? Is hy bang dat Harry se heldergroen oë skielik skarlakenrooi sal word met katagtige splete vir pupille? Harry onthou hoe Woldemort se slang-gesig deur professor Quirrell se agterkop gebars het. Hy vee met sy hand oor sy kop en wonder hoe dit sal voel as Woldemort deur sy skedel bars.

Hy voel vuil, besmet, asof hy 'n dodelike kiem in hom dra en nie op die moltrein langs onskuldige, rein mense mag sit wie se liggame en verstand nie deur Woldemort aangetas is nie. Hy het nie net die slang gesien nie, hy was die slang, hy weet dit nou.

'n Verskriklike gedagte kom by hom op, 'n herinnering wat na die oppervlak dobber en sy binnegoed soos slange laat wriemel en krul.

Wat soek Woldemort nog, behalwe volgelinge?

Goed wat hy net skelm kan kry. Soos 'n wapen. Iets wat hy nie die vorige keer gehad het nie.

Ek is die wapen, dink Harry en dis of gif deur sy are pomp sodat hy daar in die swaaiende trein in die donker tunnel yskoud word en begin sweet. Dis vir my wat Woldemort wil gebruik. Dis hoekom hulle wagte om my het, dis nie vir my veiligheid nie, dis ter wille van die ander mense. Maar dit werk nie. Hulle kan nie by Hogwarts gedurig iemand by my hê nie. En ek het meneer Weasley laas nag aangeval, dit was ek. Woldemort het my gedwing. Wat as hy nou binne-in my is en na my gedagtes luister –

“Is alles reg, Harry, skat?” fluister mevrou Weasley en leun oor Ginny om met hom te praat. “Jy lyk nie goed nie. Is iets verkeerd?”

Almal kyk na hom. Hy skud sy kop wild en staar na 'n advertensie vir huisversekering.

“Harry, skat, is jy seker jy's oukei?” vra mevrou Weasley weer toe hulle om die onversorgde lappie gras in die middel van Grimmauld-plein stap. “Jy is so bleek. Is jy seker jy het vanoggend geslaap? Gaan boontoe en gaan rus 'n paar uur voor aandete, toe.”

Harry knik. Dis net wat hy wil hê; dit gee hom 'n verskoning om met niemand te praat nie. Toe die voordeur oopgaan, stap hy verby die trolbeensambreel-staander en op met die trappe na sy en Ron se slaapkamer.

Hier loop hy op en neer tussen die twee beddens voor Phineas Nigellus se leë portretraam terwyl sy brein krioel van vrae en gedagtes wat al ondraagliker word.

Hoe het hy 'n slang geword? Is hy dalk 'n Animagus . . . nee, dit kan nie wees nie, hy sou tog geweet het . . . dalk is Woldemort 'n Animagus . . . Ja, dink Harry, dit kan wees, hy sal *natuurlik* 'n slang word . . . en wanneer ek van hom besete is, transformeer ons saam.

Hoewel dit nog nie verklaar hoe ek binne vyf minute in Londen en weer terug in my bed kon kom nie . . . Maar Woldemort is die magtigste towenaar in die wêreld, behalwe Dompeldorius, dit moet vir hom doodmaklik wees om mense rond te toor.

En toe, met 'n verskriklike steekpyn van angs, dink hy: *Maar dis heeltemal gek – as ek van Woldemort besete is, kyk hy nou deur my binne-in die Hoofkwartier van die Orde van die Feniks! Hy weet presies wie in die Orde is en waar Sirius hom bevind . . . en ek het allerhande goed gehoor wat ek nie moes hoor nie, alles wat Sirius daardie eerste aand vir ons vertel het.*

Daar is net een oplossing: hy moet Grimmauldplein onmiddellik verlaat. Hy sal in Hogwarts saam met die ander gaan Kersfees hou. Dan is hy minstens vir die vakansie veilig . . . Maar nee, dit sal nie werk nie, daar is baie mense in Hogwarts wat hy kan aanrand en beseer. Wat as dit die volgende keer Septimus of Dean of Neville is? Hy steek vas en staar na Phineas Nigellus se leë portretraam, 'n loodswaar gevoel in sy maag. Hy het nie 'n keuse nie: hy moet teruggaan na Ligusterlaan, hy moet hom heeltemal van ander towenaars afsny.

As dit is wat ek moet doen, dink Harry, dan moet ek dit doen. Hy doen sy bes om nie te dink hoe die Dursleys se gesigte gaan lyk as hy ses maande vroeër as gewoonlik voor hulle deur opdaag nie. Hy stap na sy trommel, slaan die deksel toe en sluit dit. Hy kyk outomaties rond op soek na Hedwig voor hy onthou dat sy nog by Hogwarts is. Wel, dan hoef hy nie haar hok ook te dra nie. Hy gryp die een kant van sy trommel en begin dit oor die vloer sleep na die deur, toe 'n snedige stem agter hom sê: "Loop weg, né?"

Harry kyk om. Phineas Nigellus is in sy portret. Hy leun teen die raam met 'n geamuseerde uitdrukking op sy gesig.

"Ek loop nie weg nie," sê Harry kortaf en sleep sy trommel nog 'n paar tree oor die vloer.

“Ek het gedink,” sê Phineas Nigellus en streel oor sy bokbaard, “jy is seker *dapper* aangesien jy aan Griffindor-huis behoort. Maar nou lyk dit vir my of jy beter in my huis sal vaar. Ons Slibberins is dapper, ja, maar nie onnosel nie. As daar ’n keuse is, kies ons altyd om ons eie basse te red.”

“Ek probeer nie my eie bas red nie,” sê Harry kortaf. Die trommel het vasgesteek by ’n ongelyke stuk motgevrete tapyt voor die deur.

“O, ek sien.” Phineas se wenkbroue lig. “Jy hardloop nie weg soos ’n lafaard nie – jy is *edel*.”

Harry ignoreer hom. Sy hand is op die deurknop toe Phineas Nigellus lui sê: “Ek het vir jou ’n boodskap van Albus Dompeldorius.”

Harry swaai om.

“Wat sê hy?”

“Bly waar jy is.”

“Ek het nie geroer nie!” sê Harry, sy hand nog steeds op die deurknop. “Wat is die boodskap?”

“Ek het dit so pas vir jou gegee, onnosel,” sê Phineas kalm. “Dompeldorius het gesê: ‘Bly waar jy is’.”

“Hoekom?” vra Harry gretig en los die trommel. “Hoekom wil hy hê ek moet hier bly? Wat het hy nog gesê?”

“Hoegenaamd niks.” Phineas Nigellus lig ’n dun swart wenkbrou asof Harry na sy mening voor op die wa is.

Harry se humeur vlam op soos ’n kobra uit lang gras. Hy is moeg en verward; hy was die afgelope twaalf uur tot die dood toe bevrees, toe sielsverlig, weer van voor af bang, en nog steeds weier Dompeldorius om met hom te praat.

“Dis al, nè?” sê hy hard. “Bly waar jy is”? Dis wat almal vir my gesê het toe die Dementors my aangeval het! Bly waar jy is tot die grootmense alles uitgesorteer het, Harry! Ons wil nie vir jou sê wat aangaan nie, want jou klein breintjie kan dit nie hanteer nie!”

“Weet jy,” sê Phineas Nigellus nog harder as Harry, “dis presies hoekom ek dit *gehaat* het om onderwys te gee! Jongmense is so verbrands oortuig dat hulle absoluut reg is. Het dit al ooit by jou opgekom, jou arme opgeblase klein windlawaa, dat daar dalk ’n baie goeie rede is hoekom die skoolhoof van Hogwarts nie al sy planne met jou deel nie? Of voel jy so ingedoen dat jy nie kan sien dat jy nog nooit in die moeilikheid beland het as jy na Dompeldorius geluister het nie? Maar nee, soos alle jongmense is jy oortuig dat net jy kan dink en voel, dat net jy gevaar kan herken, dat net jy slim genoeg is om te weet wat die Donker Heer beplan –”

“Dan beplan hy iets wat met my te doen het?” sê Harry vinnig.

“Is dit wat ek gesê het?” Phineas Nigellus bestudeer sy silwer syhandskoene. “Verskoon my, ek het beter dinge om te doen as om na ’n adolessente gesanik te luister . . . tot siens.”

Hy stap na die kant van die raam en verdwyn.

“Goed, loop dan!” skreeu Harry vir die leë raam. “En sê vir Dompeldorius dankie vir niks!”

Die portrettraam bly stil. Harry sleep sy trommel terug na sy bed en voetenent en gooi hom toe oë op sy maag op die verslete bedsprei. Hy is smoorkwaad en sy lyf voel seer en swaar.

Dit voel of hy ’n lang reis afgelê het . . . dis moeilik om te glo dat Cho Chang hom skaars vier-en-twintig uur gelede onder die mistel gesoen het . . . hy is so moeg . . . maar hy’s bang om te slaap . . . en hy weet nie hoe lank hy daarteen sal kan veg nie . . . Dompeldorius het gesê hy moet hier bly . . . dit beteken seker hy mag maar slaap . . . maar hy’s so bang . . . sê nou dit gebeur weer?

Hy sink weg in die skadu’s . . .

Dis of ’n film in sy kop gewag het om te begin. Hy stap in ’n verlate gang na ’n eenvoudige swart deur, verby ruwe klipmure, fakkels en ’n oop ingang tot by ’n stel kliptrappe aan die linkerkant wat ondertoe lei . . .

Hy kom by die swart deur, maar kan dit nie oopmaak nie . . . hy maak daarna, gretig om in te gaan . . . daar is iets wat hy met alle geweld wil hê . . . iets baie besonders . . . as sy litteken net nie so prikkel nie, sal hy helderder kan dink . . .

“Harry,” sê Ron se stem ver weg, “Ma sê aandete is gereed, maar jy sal iets vir jou bêre as jy eerder wil slaap.”

Harry maak sy oë oop, maar Ron is reeds weg.

Hy wil nie alleen by my wees nie, dink Harry. Nie ná wat hy Moodie hoor sê het nie.

Nie een van hulle wil hom seker meer hier hê nie, nie noudat hulle weet wat binne-in hom is nie.

Hy sal nie ondertoe gaan vir ete nie. Hy sal hom nie aan hulle opdring nie. Hy draai op sy ander sy en raak ná ’n rukkie weer aan die slaap. Baie later, in die vroeë oggendure, word hy wakker. Sy maag kramp van honger en Ron lê en snork in die bed langsaan. Hy tuur deur die vertrek en sien Phineas Nigellus se donker buitelyn in sy portret. Dompeldorius het hom seker hierheen gestuur, dink Harry, ingeval ek iemand aanval.

Die gevoel dat hy besmet is, neem toe. Hy wens half dat hy nie na Dompeldorius geluister het nie . . . As dit is hoe die lewe in Grimmauldplein van nou af gaan wees, sal hy dalk beter daaraan toe wees in Ligusterlaan.

Die volgende oggend is almal besig om Kersversierings op te hang. Harry kan nie onthou dat Sirius al ooit tevore in so 'n goeie bui was nie. Hy is so in sy skik dat hy geselskap oor die Kerstyd het dat hy selfs Kersliedere sing. Sy stem galm boontoe na die koue sitkamer waar Harry alleen sit en kyk hoe die lug voor die vensters witter word met dreigende sneeu. Op 'n vreemde manier verlekker Harry hom daarin dat hy die ander die geleentheid gee om oor hom te skinder. Dis tog wat hulle sal doen. Toe mevrou Weasley sy naam teen etenstyd by die trappe roep, maak hy of hy nie hoor nie en glip boontoe.

Teen sesuur die aand lui die voordeurklokkie en mevrou Swardt begin weer skree. Harry, wat op die oomblik in Bokbok se kamer wegkruip, neem aan dis Mundungus of een van die ander lede van die Orde wat kom kuier het. Hy maak hom so gemaklik moontlik teen die muur en voer vir die hippogrief dooie rotte, terwyl hy sy bes doen om sy eie hongerpyne te ignoreer. Hy skrik toe iemand 'n rukkie later hard aan die deur klop.

“Ek weet jy's daar binne,” sê Hermien se stem. “Kom asseblief uit. Ek moet met jou praat.”

“Wat maak jy hier?” vra Harry en maak die deur oop. Bok-bok krap tussen die strooi vir stukkies rot wat hy dalk laat val het. “Ek dag jy't saam met jou ma en pa gaan ski?”

“Ag, om eerlik te wees, ek's nie so mal oor ski nie. Dis hoekom ek hier kom Kersfees hou.” Daar is sneeu in Hermien se hare en haar gesig is pienk van die koue. “Maar moenie vir Ron sê nie. Ek het vir hom vertel ski is fantasties omdat hy so daarvoor lag. My ma en pa is 'n bietjie teleurgesteld, maar ek het vir hulle gesê almal wat goed wil doen, bly by Hogwarts om te leer. En hulle wil natuurlik hê ek moet goed vaar, so hulle verstaan. In elk geval,” sê sy kortaf, “kom ons gaan na jou kamer. Mevrou Weasley het 'n vuur aange-steek en toebroodjies soontoe gestuur.”

Harry stap saam met haar terug na die tweede verdieping. Toe hy by hulle kamer ingaan, sien hy tot sy verbasing dat Ron en Ginny op Ron se bed sit en wag.

“Ek het met die Ridderbus gekom,” sê Hermien en trek haar baadjie uit voor Harry iets kan sê. “Dompeldorius het my van-oggend vroeg vertel wat gebeur het, maar ek moes wag tot die kwartaal amptelik verby is voor ek kon waai. Umbridge is die dinges in dat julle onder haar neus verdwyn het, selfs al het Dompeldorius vir haar gesê meneer Weasley is in Sint Mungo en dat hy vir julle verlof gegee het om soontoe te gaan. So . . .”

Sy gaan sit langs Ginny op die bed en hulle al drie staan na Harry.
"Hoe voel jy?" vra Hermien.

"Goed," sê Harry stug.

"Ag, moenie lieg nie, Harry," sê Hermien ongeduldig. "Ron en Ginny sê jy kruip vir almal weg vandat julle van Sint Mungo af teruggekom het."

"O nogal, nê?" Harry gluur na Ron en Ginny. Ron kyk na sy voete, maar Ginny lyk hoegenaamd nie verleë nie.

"Wel, jy doen dit!" sê sy. "En jy wil nie eens na ons kyk nie!"

"Dis julle wat nie na my wil kyk nie!" sê Harry gebelg.

"Dalk maak julle almal beurte om te kyk en mis mekaar die hele tyd," sê Hermien, wie se mondhoëke bewe.

"Baie snaaks," snou Harry en draai weg.

"Ag, hou tog op om jouself so te bejammer," sê Hermien skerp. "Luister, hulle het vir my gesê wat julle laas nag met die Verlengbare Oor gehoor het –"

"O ja?" grom Harry en steek sy hande diep in sy sakke terwyl hy na die vallende sneeu kyk. "Dan het julle oor my gepraat? Wel, ek is besig om gewoon te raak daaraan."

"Ons wou met jou praat, Harry," sê Ginny, "maar jy kruip nog die hele tyd weg –"

"Ek was nie lus om met iemand te praat nie," sê Harry wrewelig.

"Wel, dit was nogal dom van jou," sê Ginny vererg, "aangesien ek die enigste een is wat jy ken wat al van Jy-Weet-Wie besete was en wat vir jou kan sê hoe dit voel."

Harry staan doodstil terwyl die woorde insink. Dan swaai hy om.

"Ek het skoon vergeet," sê hy.

"Gelukkige jy," sê Ginny kil.

"Ek is jammer," sê Harry en hy bedoel dit. "So... dink jy ek is besete?"

"Wel, kan jy alles onthou wat jy die afgelope tyd gedoen het? Of is daar lang tye dat jy nie weet wat jy alles aangevang het nie?"

Harry dink daaroor.

"Nee," sê hy.

"Dan is jy nie deur Jy-Weet-Wie besete nie," sê Ginny pront. "Toe hy dit aan my gedoen het, kon ek soms vir ure nie onthou wat ek gedoen het nie. Ek sal net iewers wees en glad nie weet hoe ek daar gekom het nie."

Harry is amper bang om haar te glo, maar sy hart voel tog ligter.

"Daardie droom wat ek oor jou pa en die slang gehad het –"

"Harry, jy't al tevore sulke drome gehad," sê Hermien. "Jy't verlede jaar ook soms geweet waarmee Woldemort besig was."

“Hierdie was anders.” Harry skud sy kop. “Ek was binne-in daardie slang. Dit was of ek die slang was . . . wat as Woldemort my op ’n manier na Londen vervoer het –?”

“Eendag,” sê Hermien en sy klink heeltemal moedeloos, “sal jy *Die geskiedenis van Hogwarts* lees en dan sal jy dalk onthou dat jy nie in Hogwarts kan appaereer of disappaereer nie. Nie eens Woldemort kon jou sommer net uit jou slaapsaal laat vlieg het nie, Harry.”

“Jy’t nie ’n voet uit jou bed gesit nie, my ou,” sê Ron. “Ek het gesien hoe jy vir minstens ’n minuut in jou slaap rondrol voor ons jou kon wakker kry.”

Harry loop op en af in die vertrek en dink. Wat hulle sê, troos hom nie net nie, dit maak sin . . . Hy tel ’n toebroodjie op en prop dit gulsig in sy mond sonder dat hy besef wat hy doen.

Dan is ek nie die wapen nie, dink hy en sy hart swel van vreugde en verligting. Toe Sirius op daardie oomblik verby hulle kamer na Bokbok s’n stap terwyl hy “Kom herwaarts, hippogriewe!” uit volle bors sing, voel Harry lus om saam te sing.

Hoe kon hy dit selfs oorweëg het om vir Kersfees na Ligusterlaan te gaan? Sirius se blydschap oor die huis vol mense en Harry wat by hom is, is aansteeklik. Anders as tydens die somervakansie is hy nie weer die nors gasheer nie. Dit lyk of hy vasbeslote is dat almal Kersfees net soveel, of selfs meer, as by Hogwarts sal geniet. In die aanloop na Kersdag werk hy met hulle hulp onvermoeid om alles skoon te kry en te versier, en toe almal Oukersaand in die bed kruip, is die huis feitlik onherkenbaar. Die kandelare is nie meer gevlek en vol spinnerakke nie, maar getooi met stringe huls en goue en silwer linte. Towersneeu lê in glinsterende hope op die verslete tapyte, en die groot Kersboom wat Mundungus gebring het, is versier met lewende feetjies sodat Sirius se stamboom heeltemal weggesteek is. Selfs die opgestopte elfkoppe teen die muur in die voorportaal dra Kershoede en lang baarde.

Toe Harry op Kersoggend wakker word, lê daar ’n stapel presente by sy voetenent terwyl Ron reeds halfpad deur sy heelwat groter stapel is.

“Goeie oes vanjaar,” sê hy vir Harry deur ’n warreling papier. “Dankie vir die besemkompas, dis wonderlik. Baie beter as Hermien s’n, sy’t vir my ’n *huiswerkbeplanner* gegee –”

Harry krap deur sy presente en kry een met Hermien se handskrif op. Sy het ook vir hom ’n boek gegee. Dit lyk soos ’n dagboek, maar elke keer dat hy dit iewers oopslaan, sê dit iets soos: “*Doen dit nou, of jy gaan dit berou!*”

Sirius en Lupin het vir hom 'n stel uitstekende boeke gegee met die titel *Praktiese Verdedigingstoorgrepe en hul Gebruik teen die Donker Kunste*. Dit het uitmuntende, bewegende kleurtekeninge van al die teenvloeke en grepe wat beskryf word. Harry blaai vinnig deur die eerste volume en sien dadelik dat hy dit baie handig by die DS sal kan gebruik. Hagrid het 'n harige bruin beursie gestuur. Dit het slagtande, klaarblyklik om diewe af te skrik, maar Harry kan ongelukkig nie geld daarin sit sonder dat dit sy vingers byt nie. Tonks se present is 'n klein model van 'n Vuurslag wat deur die kamer vlieg en Harry na sy eie lewensgrootte weergawe laat verlang. Ron het vir hom 'n yslike doos Allegeurtjebone gegee, meneer en mevrou Weasley die gewone handgebreide trui en 'n klomp Kerspasteitjies, en Dobbi 'n grusame skildery wat Harry vermoed hy self geskilder het. Harry het dit pas onderstebo gedraai om te sien of dit dalk so beter lyk, toe Fred en George met 'n harde klapgeluid by sy voeten ontappareer.

"Geseënde Kersfees," sê George. "Moenie nou ondertoe gaan nie."

"Hoekom nie?" vra Ron.

"Ma huil al weer," sê Fred bedruk. "Percy het sy Krismistrui teruggestuur."

"Sonder 'n briefie," voeg George by. "Hy't nie eens gevra hoe dit met Pa gaan of hom besoek of iets nie."

"Ons het haar probeer troos, vir haar gesê. Percy is net 'n hengse hoop rotmis." Fred stap om die bed om na Harry se skildery te kyk.

"Het nie gewerk nie," sê George en prop 'n Sjokoladepadde in sy mond. "Toe't Lupin oorgeneem. Laat hy haar maar eers opbeur voor ons ondertoe gaan vir ontbyt."

"Wat's dit veronderstel om te wees?" Fred loer na Dobbi se skildery. "Lyk soos 'n langarmaap met twee blou oë."

"Dis Harry!" George wys na die agterkant. "Dit staan hier agterop."

"Goeie ewebeeld," sê Fred en grinnik. Harry gooi sy nuwe huiswerkboek na hom. Dit tref die oorkantste muur, val oop op die vloer en sê plegtig: "Alles sal regkom as jy jou plig doen."

Harry en Ron staan op en trek aan. Hulle hoor hoe die res van die huisgenote mekaar 'n Geseënde Kersfees toewens. Op pad ondertoe kry hulle vir Hermien.

"Dankie vir die boek, Harry!" sê sy vrolik. "Ek wil al jare lank *Nuwe teorie van Numerologie* hê! En daardie parfuum is regtig besonder, Ron."

"Dis 'n plesier," sê Ron. "Vir wie's dit?" Hy beduie na die netjies toegedraaide present in haar hande.

"Skepsel," sê Hermien opgeruimd.

"Ek hoop nie dis klere nie!" waarsku Ron. "Jy weet wat Sirius gesê het: Skepsel weet te veel, ons kan hom nie vrylaat nie!"

"Dis nie klere nie, hoewel ek, as ek my sin kan kry, hom beslis iets anders sal laat dra as daai vieslike ou lap. Nee, dis 'n lappies-kombers. Ek het gedink dit sal sy kamer opvrolik."

"Watse kamer?" fluister Harry toe hulle verby Sirius se ma se portret stap.

"Wel, Sirius sê dis nie eintlik 'n slaapkamer nie, meer 'n soort – nes," sê Hermien. "Blykbaar slaap hy onder die warmwatersilinder in daardie kas in die kombuis."

Mevrou Weasley is alleen in die kombuis. Sy staan by die stoof en toe sy vir hulle "Geseënde Kersfees" sê, klink dit asof sy 'n nare verkoue het. Almal kyk weg.

"Dan is dit Skepsel se slaapkamer?" Ron stap na die vuil deur in die hoek oorkant die spens. Harry het dit nog nooit gesien nie.

"Ja." Hermien klink effens onseker. "Hm... ons moet seker klop."

Ron klop met sy kneukels teen die deur, maar niemand antwoord nie.

"Hy sluip seker daar bo iewers rond," sê hy en maak die deur oop. "Sies!"

Harry loer in. 'n Baie groot outydse warmwatersilinder vul die grootste deel van die kas, maar onderin tussen die pype het Skepsel vir hom 'n plek ingerig wat nogal soos 'n nes lyk. 'n Warboel lappe en ou komberse is op die vloer gepak en 'n duik in die middel wys waar Skepsel elke nag opkrul om te slaap. Tussen die lappe lê ou broodkorsies en gemufte stukkies kaas. In 'n hoek glinster klein voorwerpe en munte wat Harry reken Skepsel gered het toe Sirius die huis skoongemaak het. Die familieportrette in hul silwer rame wat Sirius destyds weggegooi het, is ook daar. Die meeste se glas is gebreek, maar die swart-wit mense staar uit die hoogte na hom, ook – sy maag trek saam – die donker vrou met die swaar ooglede wie se verhoor hy in Dompeldorius se Peinssif gesien het: Bellatrix Lestrange. Dit lyk of haar foto Skepsel se gunsteling is. Hy het dit voor al die ander neergesit en die glas lomp met towerkleeflint reggemaak.

"Ek sal sy present maar hier neersit." Hermien sit die pakkie in die holte op die hoop komberse neer. Sy maak die deur saggies toe. "Hy sal dit wel later kry."

"Gepraat van Skepsel," sê Sirius wat net toe met 'n groot kalkoen in sy arms by die spens uitkom, "het iemand hom onlangs gesien?"

"Ek het hom nog nie weer gesien sedert ons hier aangekom het nie," sê Harry. "Jy't hom uit die kombuis gejaag."

"Ja..." Sirius frons. "Weet jy, ek dink dis die laaste keer dat ek hom gesien het... Hy kruip seker hier bo iewers weg."

"Hy't nie dalk geloop nie, hé?" vra Harry. "Ek bedoel, toe jy 'uit' gese het, het hy nie dalk gedink hy moet uit die huis padgee nie?"

"Nee, nee, huiselwe kan nie hulle goed vat en loop as hulle nie klere gekry het nie. Hulle is verbind aan die familie se huis."

"Hulle kan uitgaan as hulle regtig wil," sry Harry. "Dobbi het. Hy's twee jaar gelede uit die Malfoys se huis om my te kom waarsku. Hy moes homself agterna straf, maar hy't dit nogtans gedoen."

Sirius lyk vir 'n oomblik verbouereerd. Toe sê hy: "Ek sal hom later gaan soek. Hy's seker hier bo iewers besig om sy oë uit te huil oor my ma se ou onderklere of iets. Of dalk het hy in die droogkas geklim en doodgegaan... asof ek so gelukkig sal wees."

Fred, George en Ron lag, maar Hermien kyk verwykend na hulle.

Die Weasleys, Harry en Hermien het beplan om ná hul Kersmaal by meneer Weasley te gaan kuier, vergesel van Maloog en Lupin. Mundungus sou iewers 'n motor vir die okkasie "leen", aangesien die moltreine nie op Kersdag loop nie. Hy daag net betyds vir die Kerspoeding en koekstruif op. Die motor, wat Harry seker is nie met die eienaar se toestemming geneem is nie, is soos die Weasleys se ou Ford Anglia met 'n towerspreuk vergroot. Hoewel dit doodgewoon van buite lyk, pas tien mense en Mundugus gemaklik daarin. Mevrouw Weasley aarsel voor sy inklim. Harry weet sy voel nie gemaklik met Mundungus nie, maar sy hou net so min daarvan om sonder toorkrag te reis. Uiteindelik seëvier die koue buite saam met haar kinders se pleidooie en sy gaan sit met grasie op die agterste sitplek tussen Fred en Bill.

Daar is baie min verkeer op die paaie en die reis na Sint Mungo verloop taamlik vinnig. 'n Paar hekse en towenaars stap koes-koes met die verlate straat op na die hospitaal. Harry-hulle klim uit die motor en Mundungus ry om die hoek waar hy vir hulle gaan wag. Hulle stap ongeërg na die venster waarin die winkelpop in haar groen nylonrok staan en loop een ná die ander deur die glas.

Die ontvangsarea lyk feestelik: die kristalborrels wat Sint Mungo verlig, is rooi en goud gekleur om soos reuse gloeiende Kersballe te lyk, daar hang huls bo elke kosyn en skitterwit Kersbome versier met towersneeu en yskristalle glinster in elke hoek, elkeen met 'n glansende goue ster bo-op. Dis minder besig as die vorige keer, hoewel 'n heks met 'n pruim in haar linkerneusgat vir Harry uit die pad stamp.

“Familietwis, hè?” sê die blonde heks agter die toonbank. “Die derde een vandag. Towerspreukskade, vierde verdieping.”

Meneer Weasley sit regop in sy bed, die oorblyfsels van sy kal-koen op ’n skinkbord op sy skoot. Hy lyk effens verleë toe hulle instap.

“Is alles in orde, Arthur?” vra mevrou Weasley toe almal hom ge-groet en hul presente oorhandig het.

“Ja, ja,” sê meneer Weasley ’n bietjie te hartlik. “Jy – hm – jy’t nie dalk vir heler Smetwyk gesien nie, het jy?”

“Nee?” sê mevrou Weasley agterdogtig. “Hoekom?”

“Niks, niks,” sê meneer Weasley lighartig en begin om sy stapel presente oop te maak. “Wel, het julle ’n lekker dag gehad? Wat het julle almal vir Kersfees gekry? O, Harry – dis absoluut *wonderlik!*” Hy het pas Harry se geskenk van ’n stel skroewedraaiers en smelt-draad oopgemaak.

Dit lyk nie of meneer Weasley se antwoord mevrou Weasley heel-temal tevrede stel nie. Toe hy oorleun om Harry se hand te skud, loer sy na die verbande onder sy naghemp.

“Arthur,” sê sy en dit klink soos ’n muisval wat toeklap, “jou ver-bande is verander. Hoekom is jou verbande ’n dag vroeg omgeruil? Hulle het vir my gesê hulle gaan dit eers môre doen.”

“Wat?” sê meneer Weasley. Hy lyk effens verskrik en trek die bed-degoed hoog oor sy borskas. “Nee, nee – dis niks – dis – ek –”

Dis of hy onder mevrou Weasley se priemende blik afblaas.

“Wel – hm – moet jou nie ontstel nie, Molly, maar Augustus Pye het ’n idee gehad. hy’s ’n leerlingheler, weet jy, wonderlike jong man en baie geïnteresseerd in. hm. aanvullende medisyne. ek bedoel sommige van die ou Moggelrate. wel, dit word *steke* genoem, Molly, en dit werk baie goed op – op Moggelwonde –”

Mevrou Weasley maak ’n onheilspellende geluid iewers tussen ’n kreet en ’n grom. Lupin stap na die weerwolf wat geen besoekers het nie en effens verlangend na die groep om meneer Weasley se bed staar. Bill prewel iets oor ’n koppie tee kry en Fred en George grinnik toe hulle opspring en saam met hom uitgaan.

“Wil jy vir my sê,” mevrou Weasley se stem word met elke woord harder en dit lyk nie of sy agterkom dat haar medebesoekeers skui-ling soek nie, “dat julle met Moggelrate gesukkel het?”

“Nie ‘gesukkel’ nie, Molly, skat,” sê meneer Weasley smekend, “dis net – iets wat Pye en ek gedink het kan werk – behalwe dat dit ongelukkig – wel, met hierdie spesifieke soort wonde – nie so goed werk soos ons gehoop het nie –”

“En dit beteken?”

"Wel . . . ek weet nie of jy weet wat – wat steke is nie?"

"Dit klink of julle probeer, het om jou vel toe te werk," mevrou Weasley snorklag vreugdeloos, "maar selfs jy, Arthur, kon nie so minosel gewees het nie –"

"Ek's ook lus vir tee," sê Harry en spring op.

Hermien, Ron en Ginny hardloop omtrent saam met hom deur toe. Toe die deur agter hulle toegaan, hoor hulle mevrou Weasley skree: "WAT BEDOEL JY, DIS DIE IDEE?"

Ginny skud haar kop. "Dis tipies Pa. Steke . . . verbeel jou . . ."

"Wel, weet jy, dit werk baie goed op Moggelwonde," sê Hermien redelik. "Maar iets in daardie slang se gif moet dit laat oplos of so iets. Ek wonder waar die teekamer is."

"Vyfde verdieping," sê Harry, wat onthou wat op die bord by die ontvangsheks se toonbank staan.

Hulle stap in die gang af en deur die dubbeldeure na 'n lendelam met trappe met nog portrette van helers wat nogal wreedaardig lyk. Terwyl hulle die trappe uitklim, skree die helers op hulle, diagnoseer vreemde kwale en stel aaklige rate voor. Ron is baie verontwaardig toe 'n Middeleeuse towenaar vir hom sê dat hy 'n ernstige geval van spatpokkens het.

"En wat is dit miskien?" vra hy gebelg toe die heler hom ses portrette ver volg terwyl hy die inwoners uit die rame stamp.

"Dit is 'n smartlike aantasting van die huid, jongheer, wat jou met pokmerke sal skend sodat jy nog afskuweliker sal wees –"

"Pasop wie jy 'afskuwelik' noem?" sê Ron en sy ore word rooi.

"– die enigste kans op genesing is om die lewer van een skurwe-padda styf teen jou keel vas te maak en in die volmaan nakend in 'n vat vol palingoë te staan –"

"Ek het nie spatpokkens nie!"

"Maar die onooglike letsels op jou vel, jongheer –"

"Dis sproete!" sê Ron vies. "Gaan terug na jou portret en los my uit!"

Hy draai na Harry-hulle, wat almal hul bes doen om nie te lag nie. "Watter verdieping is dit dié?"

"Ek dink dis die vyfde," sê Hermien.

"Nee, dis die vierde," sê Harry, "nog een –"

Maar toe hy in die trapportaal kom, gaan hy skielik staan en staar na die venstertjie in die dubbeldeure wat na die gang vir TOWER-SPREUKSKADE lei. 'n Man kyk na hulle met sy neus teen die glas gedruk. Hy het krullerige blonde hare, helderblou oë en 'n breek, wesenlose glimlag met skitterwit tande.

"Jislaaik!" sê Ron en staar na hom.

"O gits," sê Hermien skielik uitasem. "Dis professor Lockhart!"

Hulle voormalige onderwyser vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste stoot die deure oop en kom nader. Hy dra 'n lang pers kamerjas.

"Hallo daar," sê hy. "Julle wil seker my handtekening hê, of hoe?"

"Hy't nie juis verander nie, nè?" prewel Harry vir Ginny, wat grinnik.

"Hm – hoe gaan dit, Professor?" vra Ron en hy klink effens skuldig. Dit was Ron se stukkende towerstaf wat professor Lockhart se geheue so erg aangetas het dat hy in Sint Mungo beland het. Harry is egter minder simpatiek. Lockhart het immers destyds probeer om Harry en Ron se geheues permanent uit te wis.

"O baie goed, baie goed, dankie!" sê Lockhart opgewek en haal 'n taamlik verweerde pouveerpen uit sy sak. "Nou goed, hoeveel handtekeninge wil julle hê? Ek kan ook nou aanmekaar skryf, weet julle!"

"Hm – nie nou nie, dankie," sê Ron en lig sy wenkbroue vir Harry, wat vra: "Professor Lockhart, mag jy in die gange rondloop? Moet jy nie in jou saal wees nie?"

Die glimlag verdwyn van Lockhart se gesig. Hy kyk 'n paar oomblikke stip na Harry en toe sê hy: "Ken ons mekaar?"

"Hm . . . ja," sê Harry. "Hogwarts. Jy't daar skoolgehou."

"Skoolgehou?" Lockhart lyk verward. "Ek? Het ek?"

Die glimlag verskyn so skielik weer op sy gesig dat dit nogal ontstellend is.

"Het seker vir julle alles geleer wat julie weet, nè? Wel, wat van daardie handtekeninge? Sal ons sê 'n dosyn? Dan kan julle vir al julle maatjies ook gee sonder dat iemand afgeskeep voel!"

Net toe verskyn 'n kop om die deur aan die onderpunt van die gang en 'n stem roep: "Gilderoy, jou stouterd, waar loop jy rond?"

'n Moederlike heler met 'n stralekrans op haar kop drafstap nader. Sy glimlag vriendelik vir Harry-hulle.

"A, Gilderoy, jy't besoekers! Hoe *wonderlik*, en dit boonop op Kersdag! Weet julle, hy kry *nooit* besoekers nie, die arme ding. Ek kan dit nie verstaan nie, hy's so dierbaar."

"Ons gaan handtekeninge gee!" sê Gilderoy met 'n stralende glimlag. "Hulle wil baie hê – dring daarop aan! Ek hoop net ons het genoeg foto's!"

"Luister net na hom," sê die heler. Sy neem Lockhart se arm en kyk liefderik na hom asof hy 'n oulike tweejarige is. "Hy was nogal bekend 'n paar jaar gelede. Ons hoop hierdie behepthed met handtekeninge is 'n teken dat sy geheue begin terugkom. Kom in. Hy's in

in geslote saal, hy't seker uitgegeglip toe ek die Kersgeskenke ingeneem het, die deur word gewoonlik gesluit . . . Nie dat hy gevaarlik is nie! Dis net," sy laat sak haar stem, "hy's 'n bietjie van 'n gevaar vir homself, die arme ding . . . Weet nie wie hy is nie, julle sien, en loop weg en weet dan nie weer hoe om terug te kom nie . . . Dis lief van julle om vir hom te kom kuier."

"Wel," sê Ron en wys na die vloer bo hulle, "eintlik het ons – him –"

Maar die heler glimlag so vol verwagting vir hulle dat Ron se flou geprewel van "net 'n koppie tee" wegsterf. Hulle kyk moedeloos na mekaar en stap dan agter Lockhart en die heler aan.

"Ons gaan nie lank bly nie," sê Ron saggies.

Die heler rig haar towerstaf op die deur voor die Janus Thickey-saal en prewel: "Alohomora." Die deur swaai oop en sy neem hulle binnetoe. Sy hou Gilderoy se arm stewig vas tot sy hom in 'n leunstoel langs sy bed gemaklik gemaak het.

"Dis ons saal vir langtermyn-inwoners," sê sy saggies vir Harry-hulle. "Vir permanente towerspreukskade aan die brein. Natuurlik is daar met intensiewe toediening van towerdrankies en -spreuke tog soms 'n verbetering. Gilderoy is besig om 'n mate van sy ou self te herwin en meneer Bodus het baie verbeter. Dit lyk of hy weer begin praat, hoewel nog nie in 'n taal wat ons verstaan nie. Nou ja, ek moet die Kersgeskenke klaar uitdeel, gesels julle maar."

Harry kyk rond. Die saal is duidelik ingerig as 'n permanente tuiste vir die inwoners. Daar is baie meer persoonlike besittings by die beddens as in meneer Weasley se saal. Die muur om Gilderoy se bed is vol prente van homself. Almal glimlag breed en waai vir die nuwe aankomelinge. 'n Hele klomp is onderteken in 'n kinderlike handskrif.

Gilderoy het, nadat die heler hom in sy stoel gehelp het, klaar 'n stapel foto's nader getrek en is koorsig besig om hulle met sy veerpen te onderteken.

"Jy kan hulle in die koevert sit," sê hy vir Ginny en gooi die getekende foto's een vir een in haar skoot. "Ek is nie vergete nie, hoor. O nee, ek kry nog baie bewonderaarspos . . . Gladys Gudgeon skryf elke week . . . ek wens net ek kon weet hoekom . . ." Hy bly stil, lyk effens verward, maar glimlag dan weer stralend en gaan voort met sy handtekening. "Seker omdat ek so aantreklik is . . ."

'n Towenaar met 'n sieklike gelaatskleur wat baie bedruk lyk, lê in die bed aan die oorkant en staar na die plafon. Hy praat met homself en lyk of hy nie weet wat om hom aangaan nie. Twee beddens verder lê 'n vrou wie se hele kop vol hare is. Harry onthou dat iets soortgelyks in hul tweede jaar met Hermien gebeur het, hoewel

die skade in haar geval gelukkig nie permanent was nie. Aan die oorkant van die saal is die geblomde gordyne toegetrek om twee beddens om aan die besoekers 'n mate van privaatheid te gee.

"Hierso, Emma," sê die heler vrolik vir die vrou met die harige gesig. Sy gee vir haar 'n paar Kersgeskenke aan. "Sien, hulle het toe onthou. En jou seun het 'n uil gestuur om te sê hy kom vanaand kuier. Dit sal lekker wees, nè?"

Emma blaf 'n paar keer hard.

"En kyk hier, Broderick, hier's vir jou 'n potplant en 'n pragtige kalender met 'n spoggerige hippogrief vir elke maand. Dit sal die kamer mooi opvrolik, nè?" Die heler sit 'n taamlike lelike plant met lang swaaiende tentakels op die bedkassie langs die prewelende man neer en plak die kalender met haar towerstaf teen die muur vas. "En – o, mevrou Loggerenberg, is julle op pad?"

Harry se kop ruk op. Die gordyne om die twee beddens aan die oorkant is weggetrek en twee besoekers beweeg deur die spatie tussen die beddens. Die een is 'n formidabele ou heks met 'n lang groen rok, 'n motgevrete jakkalspels en 'n punthoed versier met iets wat soos 'n opgestopte aasvoël lyk. Die ander een, wat agter haar stap en baie terneergedruk lyk, is – Neville.

Harry weet skielik wie die mense in die verste beddens is. Hy tas wild rond op soek na iets om Ron-hulle se aandag af te lei sodat Neville die saal ongestiens en sonder vrae aan hom kan verlaat, maar Ron het ook opgekyk toe hy die naam "Loggerenberg" hoor en voor Harry hom kan keer, roep hy: "Neville!"

Neville wip en krimp ineen asof 'n koeël hom rakelings gemis het.

"Dis ons, Neville," sê Ron opgewek. Hy staan op. "Het jy gesien wie's hier –? Lockhart! Vir wie't julle kom kuier?"

"Is dit vriende van jou, Neville, skat?" vra Neville se ouma terwyl sy nader stap.

Neville lyk asof hy op enige ander plek in die wêreld sal wil wees as hier. 'n Dowwe pers skynsel kruip oor sy mollige gesig en hy kyk niemand in die oë nie.

"Ja, ja," sê sy ouma en kyk stip na Harry voor sy 'n verrimpelde klouagtige hand uitsteek. "Natuurlik weet ek wie jy is. Neville praat baie mooi van jou."

"O – dankie," sê Harry en skud haar hand. Neville kyk nie na hom nie maar na sy voete, en die kleur in sy gesig verdiep.

"En julle twee moet Weasleys wees," sê mevrou Loggerenberg en strek haar hand om die beurt na Ron en Ginny uit. "Ja, ek ken julle ouers – natuurlik nie goed nie, maar baie gawe mense, baie gaaf. En jy moet Hermien la Grange wees?"

Hermien lyk effens verbaas dat mevrou Loggerenberg haar naam ken, maar skud nietemin haar hand.

"Ja, Neville het my alles oor jou vertel. Het hom al 'n paar keer uit die pekel gehelp, nè? Hy's 'n goeie kind," en sy kyk talkserend teen haar benerige neus af na Neville, "maar ek's bevrees hy't nie sy pa se talent nie." Sy beduie met haar kop na die beddens aan die einde van die saal sodat die opgestopte aasvoel op haar hoed trillend bewe.

"Wat?" sê Ron verbaas. Harry wil op sy voet trap, maar dis moeiliker om so iets ongemerk te doen as jy jeans aanhet en nie 'n kleed nie. "Is dit jou pa daar onder, Neville?"

"En wat hoor ek?" vra mevrou Loggerenberg skerp. "Het jy nie vir jou maats van jou ouers vertel nie, Neville?"

Neville trek sy asem diep in, staar na die plafon en skud sy kop. Harry kan nie onthou dat hy al ooit so jammer vir iemand gevoel het nie, maar hy weet ook nie hoe om vir Neville uit hierdie penarie te help nie.

"Maar dis niks om voor skaam te wees nie!" sê mevrou Loggerenberg verontwaardig. "Jy moet *trots* wees, Neville, *trots*! Hulle het nie hul liggaamlike en geestesgesondheid opgeoffer sodat hul enigste seun hom vir hulle moet skaam nie!"

"Ek is nie skaam nie," sê Neville baie sag, maar hy kyk nog steeds nie na Harry-hulle nie. Ron staan op sy tone om na die twee mense in die verste beddens te kyk.

"Wel, dis 'n vreemde manier om dit te wys!" sê mevrou Loggerenberg. "My seun en sy vrou," sê sy en draai met groot waardigheid na Harry, Ron, Hermien en Ginny, "is so deur Jy-Weet-Wie se volgelinge gemartel dat hulle hul verstand verloor het."

Hermien en Ginny klap albei hul hande oor hul monde. Ron hou op om sy nek te rek en lyk geskok.

"Hulle was Aurors, sien, en hoogs gereken in die towergemeenskap," gaan mevrou Loggerenberg voort. "Uiters begaaf, die twee van hulle. Ek – ja, Alice, skat, wat is dit?"

Neville se ma het stilletjies in haar nagrok nader gekom. Harry sien dat sy nie meer so mollig en gelukkig lyk soos op Moodie se foto van die oorspronklike Orde van die Feniks nie. Sy is maer en verwese, haar oë lyk te groot en haar hare, wat heeltemal wit geword het, is yl en droog. Dit lyk nie of sy iets wil sê nie, of dalk kan sy nie, maar sy maak klein gebaartjies na Neville en hou iets na hom uit.

"Weer?" Mevrou Loggerenberg klink effens uitgeput. "Goed, Alice, skat, alles reg – Neville, neem dit, wat dit ook al is."

Maar Neville het reeds sy hand uitgesteek en sy ma druk 'n Boebels se Beste Borrelgom-papier tjie daarin.

“Dis baie mooi, skat,” sê Neville se ouma in ’n gemaak opgeruimde stem en klop haar teen die skouer.

Maar Neville sê saggies: “Dankie, Ma.”

Sy ma skuifel terug na haar bed terwyl sy neurie. Neville kyk met ’n trotserende uitdrukking op sy gesig na Harry-hulle asof hy hulle wil uitdaag om te lag, maar Harry voel dat hy nog nooit iets beleef het wat minder snaaks is as dit nie.

“Wel, ons moet gaan,” sê mevrou Loggerenberg en trek haar lang groen handskoene aan. “Dit was baie lekker om julle te ontmoet. Neville, gooi die papiertjie in die drom. Sy’t al soveel vir jou gegee, jy kan jou kamermure daarmee uitplak.”

Maar toe hulle uitstap, sien Harry hoe Neville die lekkergoedpapiertjie in sy sak steek.

Die deur gaan agter hulle toe.

“Ek het nie geweet nie,” sê Hermien tranerig.

“Ek ook nie,” sê Ron skor.

“En ek ook nie,” fluister Ginny.

Hulle kyk almal na Harry.

“Ek het,” sê hy bedruk. “Dompeldorius het my vertel, maar ek het belowe om vir niemand te sê nie. Dis waarvoor Bellatrix Lestrange Azkaban toe is, omdat sy die Cruciatus-vloek op Neville se ouers gebruik het tot hulle swaksinnig geword het.”

“Bellatrix Lestrange het dit gedoen?” fluister Hermien gewalg. “Daardie vrou wie se foto Skepsel in sy nes het?”

Daar volg ’n lang stilte wat deur Lockhart se ergerlike stem verbreek word.

“Luister, ek het nie verniet geleer om aanmekaar te skryf nie, hoor!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



OCCLUMENCY

Kreacher, it transpired, had been lurking in the attic. Sirius said he had found him up there, covered in dust, no doubt looking for more relics of the Black family to hide in his cupboard. Though Sirius seemed satisfied with this story, it made Harry uneasy. Kreacher seemed to be in a better mood on his reappearance, his bitter muttering had subsided somewhat, and he submitted to orders more docilely than usual, though once or twice Harry caught the house-elf staring avidly at him, always looking quickly away when he saw that Harry had noticed.

Harry did not mention his vague suspicions to Sirius, whose cheerfulness was evaporating fast now that Christmas was over. As the date of their departure back to Hogwarts drew nearer, he became more and more prone to what Mrs. Weasley called “fits of the sullen,” in which he would become taciturn and grumpy, often

withdrawing to Buckbeak's room for hours at a time. His gloom seeped through the house, oozing under doorways like some noxious gas, so that all of them became infected by it.

Harry did not want to leave Sirius all alone again with only Kreacher for company. In fact, for the first time in his life, he was not looking forward to returning to Hogwarts. Going back to school would mean placing himself once again under the tyranny of Dolores Umbridge, who had no doubt managed to force through another dozen decrees in their absence. Then there was no Quidditch to look forward to now that he had been banned; there was every likelihood that their burden of homework would increase as the exams drew even nearer; Dumbledore remained as remote as ever; in fact, if it had not been for the D.A., Harry felt he might have gone to Sirius and begged him to let him leave Hogwarts and remain in Grimmauld Place.

Then, on the very last day of the holidays, something happened that made Harry positively dread his return to school.

"Harry dear," said Mrs. Weasley, poking her head into his and Ron's bedroom, where the pair of them were playing wizard chess watched by Hermione, Ginny, and Crookshanks, "could you come down to the kitchen? Professor Snape would like a word with you."

Harry did not immediately register what she had said; one of his castles was engaged in a violent tussle with a pawn of Ron's, and he was egging it on enthusiastically.

"Squash him — *squash him*, he's only a pawn, you idiot — sorry, Mrs. Weasley, what did you say?"

"Professor Snape, dear. In the kitchen. He'd like a word."

Harry's mouth fell open in horror. He looked around at Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, all of whom were gaping back at him. Crookshanks, whom Hermione had been restraining with difficulty for the past quarter of an hour, leapt gleefully upon the board and set the pieces running for cover, squealing at the top of their voices.

"Snape?" said Harry blankly.

"*Professor* Snape, dear," said Mrs. Weasley reprovingly. "Now come on, quickly, he says he can't stay long."

"What's he want with you?" said Ron, looking unnerved as Mrs. Weasley withdrew from the room.

"You haven't done anything, have you?"

"No!" said Harry indignantly, racking his brains to think what he could have done that would make Snape pursue him to Grimmauld Place. Had his last piece of homework perhaps earned a T?

He pushed open the kitchen door a minute or two later to find Sirius and Snape both seated at the long kitchen table, glaring in opposite directions. The silence between them was heavy with mutual dislike. A letter lay open on the table in front of Sirius.

"Er," said Harry to announce his presence.

Snape looked around at him, his face framed between curtains of greasy black hair.

"Sit down, Potter."

"You know," said Sirius loudly, leaning back on his rear chair legs and speaking to the ceiling, "I think I'd prefer it if you didn't give orders here, Snape. It's my house, you see."

An ugly flush suffused Snape's pallid face. Harry sat down in a chair beside Sirius, facing Snape across the table.

"I was supposed to see you alone, Potter," said Snape, the familiar sneer curling his mouth, "but Black —"

"I'm his godfather," said Sirius, louder than ever.

"I am here on Dumbledore's orders," said Snape, whose voice, by contrast, was becoming more and more quietly waspish, "but by all means stay, Black, I know you like to feel . . . involved."

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Sirius, letting his chair fall back onto all four legs with a loud bang.

"Merely that I am sure you must feel — ah — frustrated by the fact that you can do nothing *useful*," Snape laid a delicate stress on the word, "for the Order."

It was Sirius's turn to flush. Snape's lip curled in triumph as he turned to Harry.

"The headmaster has sent me to tell you, Potter, that it is his wish for you to study Occlumency this term."

"Study what?" said Harry blankly.

Snape's sneer became more pronounced.

"Occlumency, Potter. The magical defense of the mind against external penetration. An obscure branch of magic, but a highly useful one."

Harry's heart began to pump very fast indeed. Defense against external penetration? But he was not being possessed; they had all agreed on that. . . .

"Why do I have to study Occlu — thing?" he blurted out.

"Because the headmaster thinks it a good idea," said Snape smoothly. "You will receive private lessons once a week, but you will not tell anybody what you are doing, least of all Dolores."

Umbridge. You understand?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Who's going to be teaching me?"

Snape raised an eyebrow.

"I am," he said.

Harry had the horrible sensation that his insides were melting. Extra lessons with Snape — what on earth had he done to deserve this? He looked quickly around at Sirius for support.

"Why can't Dumbledore teach Harry?" asked Sirius aggressively. "Why you?"

"I suppose because it is a headmaster's privilege to delegate less enjoyable tasks," said Snape silkily. "I assure you I did not beg for the job." He got to his feet. "I will expect you at six o'clock on Monday evening, Potter. My office. If anybody asks, you are taking Remedial Potions. Nobody who has seen you in my classes could deny you need them."

He turned to leave, his black traveling cloak billowing behind him.

"Wait a moment," said Sirius, sitting up straighter in his chair.

Snape turned back to face them, sneering.

"I am in rather a hurry, Black . . . unlike you, I do not have unlimited leisure time . . ."

"I'll get to the point, then," said Sirius, standing up. He was rather taller than Snape who, Harry noticed, had balled his fist in the pocket of his cloak over what Harry was sure was the handle of his wand. "If I hear you're using these Occlumency lessons to give Harry a hard time, you'll have me to answer to."

"How touching," Snape sneered. "But surely you have noticed that Potter is very like his father?"

“Yes, I have,” said Sirius proudly.

“Well then, you’ll know he’s so arrogant that criticism simply bounces off him,” Snape said sleekly.

Sirius pushed his chair roughly aside and strode around the table toward Snape, pulling out his wand as he went; Snape whipped out his own. They were squaring up to each other, Sirius looking livid, Snape calculating, his eyes darting from Sirius’s wand-tip to his face.

“Sirius!” said Harry loudly, but Sirius appeared not to hear him.

“I’ve warned you, *Snivellus*,” said Sirius, his face barely a foot from Snape’s, “I don’t care if Dumbledore thinks you’ve reformed, I know better —”

“Oh, but why don’t you tell him so?” whispered Snape. “Or are you afraid he might not take the advice of a man who has been hiding inside his mother’s house for six months very seriously?”

“Tell me, how is Lucius Malfoy these days? I expect he’s delighted his lapdog’s working at Hogwarts, isn’t he?”

“Speaking of dogs,” said Snape softly, “did you know that Lucius Malfoy recognized you last time you risked a little jaunt outside? Clever idea, Black, getting yourself seen on a safe station platform . . . gave you a cast-iron excuse not to leave your hidey-hole in future, didn’t it?”

Sirius raised his wand.

“NO!” Harry yelled, vaulting over the table and trying to get in between them, “Sirius, don’t —”

“Are you calling me a coward?” roared Sirius, trying to push Harry out of the way, but Harry would not budge.

“Why, yes, I suppose I am,” said Snape.

“Harry = get = out = of = it!” snarled Sirius, pushing him out of the way with his free hand.

The kitchen door opened and the entire Weasley family, plus Hermione, came inside, all looking very happy, with Mr. Weasley walking proudly in their midst dressed in a pair of striped pajamas covered by a mackintosh.

“Cured!” he announced brightly to the kitchen at large. “Completely cured!”

He and all the other Weasleys froze on the threshold, gazing at the scene in front of them, which was also suspended in mid-action, both Sirius and Snape looking toward the door with their wands pointing into each other’s faces and Harry immobile between them, a hand stretched out to each of them, trying to force them apart.

“Merlin’s beard,” said Mr. Weasley, the smile sliding off his face, “what’s going on here?”

Both Sirius and Snape lowered their wands. Harry looked from one to the other. Each wore an expression of utmost contempt, yet the unexpected entrance of so many witnesses seemed to have brought them to their senses. Snape pocketed his wand and swept back across the kitchen, passing the Weasleys without comment. At the door he looked back.

“Six o’clock Monday evening, Potter.”

He was gone. Sirius glared after him, his wand at his side.

“But what’s been going on?” asked Mr. Weasley again.

“Nothing, Arthur,” said Sirius, who was breathing heavily as though he had just run a long distance. “Just a friendly little chat between two old school friends . . .” With what looked like an

enormous effort, he smiled. "So . . . you're cured? That's great news, really great . . ."

"Yes, isn't it?" said Mrs. Weasley, leading her husband forward into a chair. "Healer Smethwyck worked his magic in the end, found an antidote to whatever that snake's got in its fangs, and Arthur's learned his lesson about dabbling in Muggle medicine, *haven't you, dear?*" she added, rather menacingly.

"Yes, Molly dear," said Mr. Weasley meekly.

That night's meal should have been a cheerful one with Mr. Weasley back amongst them; Harry could tell Sirius was trying to make it so, yet when his godfather was not forcing himself to laugh loudly at Fred and George's jokes or offering everyone more food, his face fell back into a moody, brooding expression. Harry was separated from him by Mundungus and Mad-Eye, who had dropped in to offer Mr. Weasley their congratulations; he wanted to talk to Sirius, to tell him that he should not listen to a word Snape said, that Snape was goading him deliberately and that the rest of them did not think Sirius was a coward for doing as Dumbledore told him and remaining in Grimmauld Place, but he had no opportunity to do so, and wondered occasionally, eyeing the ugly look on Sirius's face, whether he would have dared to even if he had the chance. Instead he told Ron and Hermione under his voice about having to take Occlumency lessons with Snape.

"Dumbledore wants to stop you having those dreams about Voldemort," said Hermione at once. "Well, you won't be sorry not to have them anymore, will you?"

"Extra lessons with Snape?" said Ron, sounding aghast. "I'd rather

have the nightmares!”

They were to return to Hogwarts on the Knight Bus the following day, escorted once again by Tonks and Lupin, both of whom were eating breakfast in the kitchen when Harry, Ron, and Hermione arrived there next morning. The adults seemed to have been midway through a whispered conversation when the door opened; all of them looked around hastily and fell silent.

After a hurried breakfast they pulled on jackets and scarves against the chilly gray January morning. Harry had an unpleasant constricted sensation in his chest; he did not want to say good-bye to Sirius. He had a bad feeling about this parting; he did not know when they would next see each other and felt that it was incumbent upon him to say something to Sirius to stop him doing anything stupid — Harry was worried that Snape’s accusation of cowardice had stung Sirius so badly he might even now be planning some foolhardy trip beyond Grimmauld Place. Before he could think of what to say, however, Sirius had beckoned him to his side.

“I want you to take this,” he said quietly, thrusting a badly wrapped package roughly the size of a paperback book into Harry’s hands.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“A way of letting me know if Snape’s giving you a hard time. No, don’t open it in here!” said Sirius, with a wary look at Mrs. Weasley, who was trying to persuade the twins to wear hand-knitted mittens. “I doubt Molly would approve — but I want you to use it if you need me, all right?”

“Okay,” said Harry, stowing the package away in the inside pocket

of his jacket, but he knew he would never use whatever it was. It would not be he, Harry, who lured Sirius from his place of safety, no matter how foully Snape treated him in their forthcoming Occlumency classes.

“Let’s go, then,” said Sirius, clapping Harry on the shoulder and smiling grimly, and before Harry could say anything else, they were heading upstairs, stopping before the heavily chained and bolted front door, surrounded by Weasleys.

“Good-bye, Harry, take care,” said Mrs. Weasley, hugging him.

“See you Harry, and keep an eye out for snakes for me!” said Mr. Weasley genially, shaking his hand.

“Right — yeah,” said Harry distractedly. It was his last chance to tell Sirius to be careful; he turned, looked into his godfather’s face and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could do so Sirius was giving him a brief, one-armed hug. He said gruffly, “Look after yourself, Harry,” and next moment Harry found himself being shunted out into the icy winter air, with Tonks (today heavily disguised as a tall, tweedy woman with iron-gray hair) chivvying him down the steps.

The door of number twelve slammed shut behind them. They followed Lupin down the front steps. As he reached the pavement, Harry looked around. Number twelve was shrinking rapidly as those on either side of it stretched sideways, squeezing it out of sight; one blink later, it had gone.

“Come on, the quicker we get on the bus the better,” said Tonks, and Harry thought there was nervousness in the glance she threw around the square. Lupin flung out his right arm.

BANG.

A violently purple, triple-decker bus had appeared out of thin air in front of them, narrowly avoiding the nearest lamppost, which jumped backward out of its way.

A thin, pimply, jug-eared youth in a purple uniform leapt down onto the pavement and said, "Welcome to the —"

"Yes, yes, we know, thank you," said Tonks swiftly. "On, on, get on —"

And she shoved Harry forward toward the steps, past the conductor, who goggled at Harry as he passed.

"'Ere — it's 'Arry — !"

"If you shout his name I will curse you into oblivion," muttered Tonks menacingly, now shunting Ginny and Hermione forward.

"I've always wanted to go on this thing," said Ron happily, joining Harry on board and looking around.

It had been evening the last time Harry had traveled by Knight Bus and its three decks had been full of brass bedsteads. Now, in the early morning, it was crammed with an assortment of mismatched chairs grouped haphazardly around windows. Some of these appeared to have fallen over when the bus stopped abruptly in Grimmauld Place; a few witches and wizards were still getting to their feet, grumbling, and somebody's shopping bag had slid the length of the bus; an unpleasant mixture of frog spawn, cockroaches, and custard creams was scattered all over the floor.

"Looks like we'll have to split up," said Tonks briskly, looking around for empty chairs. "Fred, George, and Ginny, if you just take those seats at the back . . . Remus can stay with you . . ."

She, Harry, Ron, and Hermione proceeded up to the very top deck, where there were two chairs at the very front of the bus and two at the back. Stan Shunpike, the conductor, followed Harry and Ron eagerly to the back. Heads turned as Harry passed and when he sat down, he saw all the faces flick back to the front again.

As Harry and Ron handed Stan eleven Sickles each, the bus set off again, swaying ominously. It rumbled around Grimmauld Square, weaving on and off the pavement, then, with another tremendous BANG, they were all flung backward; Ron's chair toppled right over and Pigwidgeon, who had been on his lap, burst out of his cage and flew twittering wildly up to the front of the bus where he fluttered down upon Hermione's shoulder instead. Harry, who had narrowly avoided falling by seizing a candle bracket, looked out of the window: they were now speeding down what appeared to be a motorway.

"Just outside Birmingham," said Stan happily, answering Harry's unasked question as Ron struggled up from the floor. "You keepin' well, then, 'Arry? I seen your name in the paper loads over the summer, but it weren't never nuffink very nice. . . . I said to Ern, I said, 'e didn't seem like a nutter when we met 'im, just goes to show, dunnit?'"

He handed over their tickets and continued to gaze, enthralled, at Harry; apparently Stan did not care how nutty somebody was if they were famous enough to be in the paper. The Knight Bus swayed alarmingly, overtaking a line of cars on the inside. Looking toward the front of the bus Harry saw Hermione cover her eyes with her hands, Pigwidgeon still swaying happily on her shoulder.

BANG.

Chairs slid backward again as the Knight Bus jumped from the Birmingham motorway to a quiet country lane full of hairpin bends. Hedgerows on either side of the road were leaping out of their way as they mounted the verges. From here they moved to a main street in the middle of a busy town, then to a viaduct surrounded by tall hills, then to a windswept road between high-rise flats, each time with a loud BANG.

"I've changed my mind," muttered Ron, picking himself up from the floor for the sixth time, "I never want to ride on here again."

"Listen, it's 'Ogwarts stop after this," said Stan brightly, swaying toward them. "That bossy woman up front 'oo got on with you, she's given us a little tip to move you up the queue. We're just gonna let Madam Marsh off first, though —" There was more retching from downstairs, followed by a horrible spattering sound. "She's not feeling 'er best."

A few minutes later the Knight Bus screeched to a halt outside a small pub, which squeezed itself out of the way to avoid a collision. They could hear Stan ushering the unfortunate Madam Marsh out of the bus and the relieved murmurings of her fellow passengers on the second deck. The bus moved on again, gathering speed, until —

BANG.

They were rolling through a snowy Hogsmeade. Harry caught a glimpse of the Hog's Head down its side street, the severed boar's head sign creaking in the wintry wind. Flecks of snow hit the large window at the front of the bus. At last they rolled to a halt outside the gates to Hogwarts.

Lupin and Tonks helped them off the bus with their luggage and then got off to say good-bye. Harry glanced up at the three decks of the Knight Bus and saw all the passengers staring down at them, noses flat against the windows.

“You’ll be safe once you’re in the grounds,” said Tonks, casting a careful eye around at the deserted road. “Have a good term, okay?”

“Look after yourselves,” said Lupin, shaking hands all round and reaching Harry last. “And listen . . .” He lowered his voice while the rest of them exchanged last-minute good-byes with Tonks, “Harry, I know you don’t like Snape, but he is a superb Occlumens and we all — Sirius included — want you to learn to protect yourself, so work hard, all right?”

“Yeah, all right,” said Harry heavily, looking up into Lupin’s prematurely lined face. “See you, then . . .”

The six of them struggled up the slippery drive toward the castle dragging their trunks. Hermione was already talking about knitting a few elf hats before bedtime. Harry glanced back when they reached the oak front doors; the Knight Bus had already gone, and he half-wished, given what was coming the following day, that he was still on board.

Harry spent most of the next day dreading the evening. His morning Potions lesson did nothing to dispel his trepidation, as Snape was as unpleasant as ever, and Harry’s mood was further lowered by the fact that members of the D.A. were continually approaching him in the corridors between classes, asking hopefully whether there would be a meeting that night.

"I'll let you know when the next one is," Harry said over and over again, "but I can't do it tonight, I've got to go to — er — Remedial Potions . . ."

"You take *Remedial Potions*?" asked Zacharias Smith superciliously, having cornered Harry in the entrance hall after lunch. "Good Lord, you must be terrible, Snape doesn't usually give extra lessons, does he?"

As Smith strode away in an annoyingly buoyant fashion, Ron glared after him.

"Shall I jinx him? I can still get him from here," he said, raising his wand and taking aim between Smith's shoulder blades.

"Forget it," said Harry dismally. "It's what everyone's going to think, isn't it? That I'm really stup —"

"Hi, Harry," said a voice behind him. He turned around and found Cho standing there.

"Oh," said Harry as his stomach leapt uncomfortably. "Hi."

"We'll be in the library, Harry," said Hermione firmly, and she seized Ron above the elbow and dragged him off toward the marble staircase.

"Had a good Christmas?" asked Cho.

"Yeah, not bad," said Harry.

"Mine was pretty quiet," said Cho. For some reason, she was looking rather embarrassed. "Erm . . . there's another Hogsmeade trip next month, did you see the notice?"

"What? Oh no, I haven't checked the notice board since I got back . . ."

"Yes, it's on Valentine's Day . . ."

"Right," said Harry, wondering why she was telling him this.

"Well, I suppose you want to — ?"

"Only if you do," she said eagerly.

Harry stared. He had been about to say "I suppose you want to know when the next D.A. meeting is?" but her response did not seem to fit.

"I — er —" he said.

"Oh, it's okay if you don't," she said, looking mortified. "Don't worry. I-I'll see you around."

She walked away. Harry stood staring after her, his brain working frantically. Then something clunked into place.

"Cho! Hey — CHO!"

He ran after her, catching her halfway up the marble staircase.

"Er — d'you want to come into Hogsmeade with me on Valentine's Day?"

"Oooh, yes!" she said, blushing crimson and beaming at him.

"Right . . . well . . . that's settled then," said Harry, and feeling that the day was not going to be a complete loss after all, he headed off to the library to pick up Ron and Hermione before their afternoon lessons, walking in a rather bouncy way himself.

By six o'clock that evening, however, even the glow of having successfully asked out Cho Chang was insufficient to lighten the ominous feelings that intensified with every step Harry took toward Snape's office.

He paused outside the door when he reached it, wishing he were almost anywhere else, then, taking a deep breath, knocked, and entered.

It was a shadowy room lined with shelves bearing hundreds of glass jars in which floated slimy bits of animals and plants, suspended in variously colored potions. In a corner stood the cupboard full of ingredients that Snape had once accused Harry — not without reason — of robbing. Harry's attention was drawn toward the desk, however, where a shallow stone basin engraved with runes and symbols lay in a pool of candlelight. Harry recognized it at once — Dumbledore's Pensieve. Wondering what on earth it was doing here, he jumped when Snape's cold voice came out of the corner.

"Shut the door behind you, Potter."

Harry did as he was told with the horrible feeling that he was imprisoning himself as he did so. When he turned back to face the room Snape had moved into the light and was pointing silently at the chair opposite his desk. Harry sat down and so did Snape, his cold black eyes fixed unblinkingly upon Harry, dislike etched in every line of his face.

"Well, Potter, you know why you are here," he said. "The headmaster has asked me to teach you Occlumency. I can only hope that you prove more adept at it than Potions."

"Right," said Harry tersely.

"This may not be an ordinary class, Potter," said Snape, his eyes narrowed malevolently, "but I am still your teacher and you will therefore call me 'sir' or 'Professor' at all times."

"Yes . . . *sir*," said Harry.

"Now, Occlumency. As I told you back in your dear godfather's kitchen, this branch of magic seals the mind against magical intrusion

and influence.”

“And why does Professor Dumbledore think I need it, sir?” said Harry, looking directly into Snape’s dark, cold eyes and wondering whether he would answer.

Snape looked back at him for a moment and then said contemptuously, “Surely even you could have worked that out by now, Potter? The Dark Lord is highly skilled at Legilimency —”

“What’s that? *Sir*?”

“It is the ability to extract feelings and memories from another person’s mind —”

“He can read minds?” said Harry quickly, his worst fears confirmed.

“You have no subtlety, Potter,” said Snape, his dark eyes glittering. “You do not understand fine distinctions. It is one of the shortcomings that makes you such a lamentable potion-maker.”

Snape paused for a moment, apparently to savor the pleasure of insulting Harry, before continuing, “Only Muggles talk of ‘mind reading.’ The mind is not a book, to be opened at will and examined at leisure. Thoughts are not etched on the inside of skulls, to be perused by any invader. The mind is a complex and many-layered thing, Potter . . . or at least, most minds are . . .” He smirked. “It is true, however, that those who have mastered Legilimency are able, under certain conditions, to delve into the minds of their victims and to interpret their findings correctly. The Dark Lord, for instance, almost always knows when somebody is lying to him. Only those skilled at Occlumency are able to shut down those feelings and memories that contradict the lie, and so utter falsehoods in his

presence without detection.”

Whatever Snape said, Legilimency sounded like mind reading to Harry and he did not like the sound of it at all.

“So he could know what we’re thinking right now? Sir?”

“The Dark Lord is at a considerable distance and the walls and grounds of Hogwarts are guarded by many ancient spells and charms to ensure the bodily and mental safety of those who dwell within them,” said Snape. “Time and space matter in magic, Potter. Eye contact is often essential to Legilimency.”

“Well then, why do I have to learn Occlumency?”

Snape eyed Harry, tracing his mouth with one long, thin finger as he did so.

“The usual rules do not seem to apply with you, Potter. The curse that failed to kill you seems to have forged some kind of connection between you and the Dark Lord. The evidence suggests that at times, when your mind is most relaxed and vulnerable — when you are asleep, for instance — you are sharing the Dark Lord’s thoughts and emotions. The headmaster thinks it inadvisable for this to continue. He wishes me to teach you how to close your mind to the Dark Lord.”

Harry’s heart was pumping fast again. None of this added up.

“But why does Professor Dumbledore want to stop it?” he asked abruptly. “I don’t like it much, but it’s been useful, hasn’t it? I mean . . . I saw that snake attack Mr. Weasley and if I hadn’t, Professor Dumbledore wouldn’t have been able to save him, would he? Sir?”

Snape stared at Harry for a few moments, still tracing his mouth

with his finger. When he spoke again, it was slowly and deliberately, as though he weighed every word.

“It appears that the Dark Lord has been unaware of the connection between you and himself until very recently. Up till now it seems that you have been experiencing his emotions and sharing his thoughts without his being any the wiser. However, the vision you had shortly before Christmas —”

“The one with the snake and Mr. Weasley?”

“Do not interrupt me, Potter,” said Snape in a dangerous voice. “As I was saying . . . the vision you had shortly before Christmas represented such a powerful incursion upon the Dark Lord’s thoughts —”

“I saw inside the snake’s head, not his!”

“I thought I just told you not to interrupt me, Potter?”

But Harry did not care if Snape was angry; at last he seemed to be getting to the bottom of this business. He had moved forward in his chair so that, without realizing it, he was perched on the very edge, tense as though poised for flight.

“How come I saw through the snake’s eyes if it’s Voldemort’s thoughts I’m sharing?”

“Do not say the Dark Lord’s name!” spat Snape.

There was a nasty silence. They glared at each other across the Pensieve.

“Professor Dumbledore says his name,” said Harry quietly.

“Dumbledore is an extremely powerful wizard,” Snape muttered. “While *he* may feel secure enough to use the name . . . the rest of us . . .” He rubbed his left forearm, apparently unconsciously, on the

spot where Harry knew the Dark Mark was burned into his skin.

"I just wanted to know," Harry began again, forcing his voice back to politeness, "why —"

"You seem to have visited the snake's mind because that was where the Dark Lord was at that particular moment," snarled Snape. "He was possessing the snake at the time and so you dreamed you were inside it too . . ."

"And Vol — he — realized I was there?"

"It seems so," said Snape coolly.

"How do you know?" said Harry urgently. "Is this just Professor Dumbledore guessing, or — ?"

"I told you," said Snape, rigid in his chair, his eyes slits, "to call me 'sir.'"

"Yes, sir," said Harry impatiently, "but how do you know — ?"

"It is enough that we know," said Snape repressively. "The important point is that the Dark Lord is now aware that you are gaining access to his thoughts and feelings. He has also deduced that the process is likely to work in reverse; that is to say, he has realized that he might be able to access your thoughts and feelings in return —"

"And he might try and make me do things?" asked Harry. "*Sir?*" he added hurriedly.

"He might," said Snape, sounding cold and unconcerned. "Which brings us back to Occlumency."

Snape pulled out his wand from an inside pocket of his robes and Harry tensed in his chair, but Snape merely raised the wand to his temple and placed its tip into the greasy roots of his hair. When he

withdrew it, some silvery substance came away, stretching from temple to wand like a thick gossamer strand, which broke as he pulled the wand away from it and fell gracefully into the Pensieve, where it swirled silvery white, neither gas nor liquid. Twice more Snape raised the wand to his temple and deposited the silvery substance into the stone basin, then, without offering any explanation of his behavior, he picked up the Pensieve carefully, removed it to a shelf out of their way and returned to face Harry with his wand held at the ready.

“Stand up and take out your wand, Potter.”

Harry got to his feet feeling nervous. They faced each other with the desk between them.

“You may use your wand to attempt to disarm me, or defend yourself in any other way you can think of,” said Snape.

“And what are you going to do?” Harry asked, eyeing Snape’s wand apprehensively.

“I am about to attempt to break into your mind,” said Snape softly. “We are going to see how well you resist. I have been told that you have already shown aptitude at resisting the Imperius Curse. . . . You will find that similar powers are needed for this. . . . Brace yourself, now. . . . *Legilimens!*”

Snape had struck before Harry was ready, before Harry had even begun to summon any force of resistance: the office swam in front of his eyes and vanished; image after image was racing through his mind like a flickering film so vivid it blinded him to his surroundings. . . .

He was five, watching Dudley riding a new red bicycle, and his heart was bursting with jealousy. . . . He was nine, and Ripper the

bulldog was chasing him up a tree and the Dursleys were laughing below on the lawn. . . . He was sitting under the Sorting Hat, and it was telling him he would do well in Slytherin. . . . Hermione was lying in the hospital wing, her face covered with thick black hair. . . . A hundred dementors were closing in on him beside the dark lake. . . . Cho Chang was drawing nearer to him under the mistletoe. . . .

No, said a voice in Harry's head, as the memory of Cho drew nearer, *you're not watching that, you're not watching it, it's private*

He felt a sharp pain in his knee. Snape's office had come back into view and he realized that he had fallen to the floor; one of his knees had collided painfully with the leg of Snape's desk. He looked up at Snape, who had lowered his wand and was rubbing his wrist. There was an angry weal there, like a scorch mark.

"Did you mean to produce a Stinging Hex?" asked Snape coolly.

"No," said Harry bitterly, getting up from the floor.

"I thought not," said Snape contemptuously. "You let me get in too far. You lost control."

"Did you see everything I saw?" Harry asked, unsure whether he wanted to hear the answer.

"Flashes of it," said Snape, his lip curling. "To whom did the dog belong?"

"My Aunt Marge," Harry muttered, hating Snape.

"Well, for a first attempt that was not as poor as it might have been," said Snape, raising his wand once more. "You managed to stop me eventually, though you wasted time and energy shouting. You

must remain focused. Repel me with your brain and you will not need to resort to your wand!”

“I’m trying,” said Harry angrily, “but you’re not telling me how!”

“Manners, Potter,” said Snape dangerously. “Now, I want you to close your eyes.”

Harry threw him a filthy look before doing as he was told. He did not like the idea of standing there with his eyes shut while Snape faced him, carrying a wand.

“Clear your mind, Potter,” said Snape’s cold voice. “Let go of all emotion . . .”

But Harry’s anger at Snape continued to pound through his veins like venom. Let go of his anger? He could as easily detach his legs . . .

“You’re not doing it, Potter. . . . You will need more discipline than this. . . . Focus, now . . .”

Harry tried to empty his mind, tried not to think, or remember, or feel. . . .

“Let’s go again . . . on the count of three . . . one — two — three — *Legilimens!*”

A great black dragon was rearing in front of him. . . . His father and mother were waving at him out of an enchanted mirror. . . . Cedric Diggory was lying on the ground with blank eyes staring at him. . . .

“NOOOOOOOO!”

He was on his knees again, his face buried in his hands, his brain aching as though someone had been trying to pull it from his skull.

“Get up!” said Snape sharply. “Get up! You are not trying, you are

making no effort, you are allowing me access to memories you fear, handing me weapons!”

Harry stood up again, his heart thumping wildly as though he had really just seen Cedric dead in the graveyard. Snape looked paler than usual, and angrier, though not nearly as angry as Harry was.

“I — am — making — an — effort,” he said through clenched teeth.

“I told you to empty yourself of emotion!”

“Yeah? Well, I’m finding that hard at the moment,” Harry snarled.

“Then you will find yourself easy prey for the Dark Lord!” said Snape savagely. “Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked this easily — weak people, in other words — they stand no chance against his powers! He will penetrate your mind with absurd ease, Potter!”

“I am not weak,” said Harry in a low voice, fury now pumping through him so that he thought he might attack Snape in a moment.

“Then prove it! Master yourself!” spat Snape. “Control your anger, discipline your mind! We shall try again! Get ready, now! *Legilimens!*”

He was watching Uncle Vernon hammering the letter box shut. . . . A hundred dementors were drifting across the lake in the grounds toward him. . . . He was running along a windowless passage with Mr. Weasley. . . . They were drawing nearer to the plain black door at the end of the corridor. . . . Harry expected to go through it . . . but Mr. Weasley led him off to the left, down a flight of stone steps.

“I KNOW! I KNOW!”

He was on all fours again on Snape's office floor, his scar was prickling unpleasantly, but the voice that had just issued from his mouth was triumphant. He pushed himself up again to find Snape staring at him, his wand raised. It looked as though, this time, Snape had lifted the spell before Harry had even tried to fight back.

"What happened then, Potter?" he asked, eyeing Harry intently.

"I saw — I remembered," Harry panted. "I've just realized . . ."

"Realized what?" asked Snape sharply.

Harry did not answer at once; he was still savoring the moment of blinding realization as he rubbed his forehead.

He had been dreaming about a windowless corridor ending in a locked door for months, without once realizing that it was a real place. Now, seeing the memory again, he knew that all along he had been dreaming about the corridor down which he had run with Mr. Weasley on the twelfth of August as they hurried to the courtrooms in the Ministry. It was the corridor leading to the Department of Mysteries, and Mr. Weasley had been there the night that he had been attacked by Voldemort's snake.

He looked up at Snape.

"What's in the Department of Mysteries?"

"What did you say?" Snape asked quietly and Harry saw, with deep satisfaction, that Snape was unnerved.

"I said, what's in the Department of Mysteries, *sir*?" Harry said.

"And why," said Snape slowly, "would you ask such a thing?"

"Because," said Harry, watching Snape closely for a reaction, "that corridor I've just seen — I've been dreaming about it for months — I've just recognized it — it leads to the Department of

Mysteries . . . and I think Voldemort wants something from —”

“I have told you not to say the Dark Lord’s name!”

They glared at each other. Harry’s scar seared again, but he did not care. Snape looked agitated. When he spoke again he sounded as though he was trying to appear cool and unconcerned.

“There are many things in the Department of Mysteries, Potter, few of which you would understand and none of which concern you, do I make myself plain?”

“Yes,” Harry said, still rubbing his prickling scar, which was becoming more painful.

“I want you back here same time on Wednesday, and we will continue work then.”

“Fine,” said Harry. He was desperate to get out of Snape’s office and find Ron and Hermione.

“You are to rid your mind of all emotion every night before sleep — empty it, make it blank and calm, you understand?”

“Yes,” said Harry, who was barely listening.

“And be warned, Potter . . . I shall know if you have not practiced . . .”

“Right,” Harry mumbled. He picked up his schoolbag, swung it over his shoulder, and hurried toward the office door. As he opened it he glanced back at Snape, who had his back to Harry and was scooping his own thoughts out of the Pensieve with the tip of his wand and replacing them carefully inside his own head. Harry left without another word, closing the door carefully behind him, his scar still throbbing painfully.

Harry found Ron and Hermione in the library, where they were

working on Umbridge's most recent ream of homework. Other students, nearly all of them fifth years, sat at lamp-lit tables nearby, noses close to books, quills scratching feverishly, while the sky outside the mullioned windows grew steadily blacker. The only other sound was the slight squeaking of one of Madam Pince's shoes as the librarian prowled the aisles menacingly, breathing down the necks of those touching her precious books.

Harry felt shivery; his scar was still aching, he felt almost feverish. When he sat down opposite Ron and Hermione he caught sight of himself in the window opposite. He was very white, and his scar seemed to be showing up more clearly than usual.

"How did it go?" Hermione whispered, and then, looking concerned, "Are you all right, Harry?"

"Yeah . . . fine . . . I dunno," said Harry impatiently, wincing as pain shot through his scar again. "Listen . . . I've just realized something . . ."

And he told them what he had just seen and deduced.

"So . . . so, are you saying . . ." whispered Ron, as Madam Pince swept past, squeaking slightly, "that the weapon — the thing You-Know-Who's after — is in the Ministry of Magic?"

"In the Department of Mysteries, it's got to be," Harry whispered. "I saw that door when your dad took me down to the courtrooms for my hearing and it's definitely the same one he was guarding when the snake bit him."

Hermione let out a long, slow sigh. "Of course," she breathed.

"Of course what?" said Ron rather impatiently.

"Ron, think about it. . . . Sturgis Podmore was trying to get through

a door at the Ministry of Magic. . . . It must have been that one, it's too much of a coincidence!"

"How come Sturgis was trying to break in when he's on our side?" said Ron.

"Well, I don't know," Hermione admitted. "That *is* a bit odd. . . ."

"So what's in the Department of Mysteries?" Harry asked Ron. "Has your dad ever mentioned anything about it?"

"I know they call the people who work in there 'Unspeakables,'" said Ron, frowning. "Because no one really seems to know what they do in there. . . . Weird place to have a weapon. . . ."

"It's not weird at all, it makes perfect sense," said Hermione. "It will be something top secret that the Ministry has been developing, I expect. . . . Harry, are you sure you're all right?"

For Harry had just run both his hands hard over his forehead as though trying to iron it.

"Yeah. . . . fine. . . ." he said, lowering his hands, which were trembling. "I just feel a bit. . . . I don't like Occlumency much. . . ."

"I expect anyone would feel shaky if they'd had their mind attacked over and over again," said Hermione sympathetically. "Look, let's get back to the common room, we'll be a bit more comfortable there. . . ."

But the common room was packed and full of shrieks of laughter and excitement; Fred and George were demonstrating their latest bit of joke shop merchandise.

"Headless Hats!" shouted George, as Fred waved a pointed hat decorated with a fluffy pink feather at the watching students. "Two Galleons each — watch Fred, now!"

Fred swept the hat onto his head, beaming. For a second he merely looked rather stupid, then both hat and head vanished.

Several girls screamed, but everyone else was roaring with laughter.

“And off again!” shouted George, and Fred’s hand groped for a moment in what seemed to be thin air over his shoulder, then his head reappeared as he swept the pink-feathered hat from it again.

“How do those hats work, then?” said Hermione, distracted from her homework and watching Fred and George. “I mean, obviously it’s some kind of Invisibility Spell, but it’s rather clever to have extended the field of invisibility beyond the boundaries of the charmed object. . . . I’d imagine the charm wouldn’t have a very long life though . . .”

Harry did not answer; he was still feeling ill.

“I’m going to have to do this tomorrow,” he muttered, pushing the books he had just taken out of his bag back inside it.

“Well, write it in your homework planner then!” said Hermione encouragingly. “So you don’t forget!”

Harry and Ron exchanged looks as he reached into his bag, withdrew the planner and opened it tentatively.

“Don’t leave it till later, you big second-rater!” chided the book as Harry scribbled down Umbridge’s homework. Hermione beamed at it.

“I think I’ll go to bed,” said Harry, stuffing the homework planner back into his bag and making a mental note to drop it in the fire the first opportunity he got.

He walked across the common room, dodging George, who tried

to put a Headless Hat on him, and reached the peace and cool of the stone staircase to the boys' dormitories. He was feeling sick again, just as he had the night he had had the vision of the snake, but thought that if he could just lie down for a while he would be all right.

He opened the door of his dormitory and was one step inside it when he experienced pain so severe he thought that someone must have sliced into the top of his head. He did not know where he was, whether he was standing or lying down, he did not even know his own name. . . .

Maniacal laughter was ringing in his ears. . . . He was happier than he had been in a very long time. . . . Jubilant, ecstatic, triumphant. . . . A wonderful, wonderful thing had happened. . . .

"Harry? HARRY!"

Someone had hit him around the face. The insane laughter was punctuated with a cry of pain. The happiness was draining out of him, but the laughter continued. . . .

He opened his eyes and as he did so, he became aware that the wild laughter was coming out of his own mouth. The moment he realized this, it died away; Harry lay panting on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, the scar on his forehead throbbing horribly. Ron was bending over him, looking very worried.

"What happened?" he said.

"I . . . dunno" Harry gasped, sitting up again. "He's really happy . . . really happy"

"You-Know-Who is?"

"Something good's happened," mumbled Harry. He was shaking as badly as he had done after seeing the snake attack Mr. Weasley and

felt very sick. "Something he's been hoping for."

The words came, just as they had back in the Gryffindor changing room, as though a stranger was speaking them through Harry's mouth, yet he knew they were true. He took deep breaths, willing himself not to vomit all over Ron. He was very glad that Dean and Seamus were not here to watch this time.

"Hermione told me to come and check on you," said Ron in a low voice, helping Harry to his feet. "She says your defenses will be low at the moment, after Snape's been fiddling around with your mind. . . . Still, I suppose it'll help in the long run, won't it?"

He looked doubtfully at Harry as he helped him toward bed. Harry nodded without any conviction and slumped back on his pillows, aching all over from having fallen to the floor so often that evening, his scar still prickling painfully. He could not help feeling that his first foray into Occlumency had weakened his mind's resistance rather than strengthening it, and he wondered, with a feeling of great trepidation, what had happened to make Lord Voldemort the happiest he had been in fourteen years.

Okklumensie

Skepsel het toe al die tyd in die solder weggekrui. Sirius sê hy het hom daar gekry, vol stof, waarskynlik op soek na aandenkings van die Swardt-familie om in sy kas weg te steek. Hoewel Sirius skynbaar met die verduideliking tevrede is, voel Harry onrustig. Skepsel is sedert hy terug is in 'n baie beter bui – hy brom nie meer so baie onderlangs nie en luister meer geredelik na bevele. Tog betrap Harry hom 'n paar keer dat hy stip na hom staar en vinnig wegkyk as hy besef Harry het dit agtergekom.

Harry sê niks oor sy vermoedens vir Sirius nie, wie se gemoedstemming vinnig agteruitgaan noudat Kersfees verby is. Hoe nader die dag van hul vertrek na Hogwarts kom, hoe swartgalliger word hy. Hy is kortaf en iesegrimmig en sit dikwels vir ure by Bokbok in die kamer. Sy swaarmoedigheid versprei soos 'n gifgas deur die huis en tas almal aan.

Harry wens hy hoef nie vir Sirius alleen by Skepsel agter te laat nie. Vir die eerste keer in sy lewe sien hy nie daarna uit om terug Hogwarts toe te gaan nie. Dolores Umbridge sal haar skrikbewind sonder twyfel voortsit – sy het waarskynlik reeds nog 'n paar dosyn wette laat maak terwyl hulle weg was. Ná sy verbod om aan Kwiddiek deel te neem, kan Harry nie eens meer daarna uitsien nie, hul huiswerk gaan al hoe meer word soos die eksamen nader kom en Dompeldorius bly nog steeds op 'n afstand. As dit nie vir die DS was nie, sou Harry vir Sirius gesmeek het om Hogwarts te mag verlaat en in Grimmauldplein te kom bly.

Toe, op die laaste dag van die vakansie, gebeur iets wat Harry 'n absolute weersin in die skool gee.

“Harry, skat!” Mevrou Weasley se kop verskyn om die deur van sy en Ron se kamer, waar hulle towenaarskaak speel terwyl Hermien, Ginny en Kromskeen toekyk. “Kom gou kombuis toe, professor Snerp wil iets vir jou sê.”

Dit dring nie dadelik tot Harry deur wat sy gesê het nie. Een van sy kastele is 'n doodstryd met een van Ron se pionne gewikkel en hy is besig om dit entoesiasies aan te hits.

"Maak hom dood – maak hom dood, hy's net 'n pion, jou sot. Ekskuus, mevrou Weasley, wat is dit?"

"Professor Snerp, skat. In die kombuis. Hy wil met jou praat."

Harry se mond val van skrik oop. Hy kyk na Ron, Hermien en Ginny, wat hom verstom aangaap. Kromskeen, vir wie Hermien die afgelope kwartier met moeite beheer het, spring met 'n hoog op die skaakbord sodat die stukke skreeuend skuiling soek.

"Snerp?" sê Harry oorbluf.

"Professor Snerp, skat," help mevrou Weasley hom reg. "Kom gou, hy sê hy kan nie lank bly nie."

"Wat wil hy hê?" vra Ron ontsteld toe sy uitstap. "Jy't mos niks verkeerds gedoen nie?"

"Neel!" sê Harry verontwaardig terwyl hy angstig wonder hoekom Snerp hom in Grimmauldplein onder vier oë wil spreek. Het hy dalk 'n T vir sy laaste stuk huiswerk gekry?

'n Paar minute later stoot hy die kombuisdeur oop en sien vir Sirius en Snerp by die lang kombuistafel sit. Hulle kyk nie na mekaar nie. Die stilte tussen hulle is swaar van weersin. 'n Brief lê oop op die tafel voor Sirius.

"H-hm," sê Harry om sy teenwoordigheid aan te kondig.

Snerp kyk om na hom, sy gesig geraam in 'n gordyn olierige swart hare. "Sit, Potter."

"Luister," sê Sirius hard. Hy ry op sy stoel se agterpote en praat in die plafon se rigting. "Ek sal dit verkies as jy nie hier die bevele gee nie, Snerp. Dis my huis hierdie."

'n Woedende blos kruip oor Snerp se bleek gesig. Harry gaan sit op die stoel langs Sirius en kyk oor die tafel na Snerp.

"Ek was veronderstel om jou alleen te sien, Potter, maar Swardt –" Snerp het die bekende honende trek om sy mond.

"Ek is sy peetpa," sê Sirius nog harder.

"Ek is hier in opdrag van Dompeldorius," sê Snerp toenemend venyniger, "maar bly gerus, Swardt, ek weet jy wil graag voel jy's betrokke."

"En wat beteken dit miskien?" Sirius se stoel val met 'n harde slag terug op sy vier pote.

"Bloot dat ek seker is jy moet – aa – gefrustreerd voel omdat jy niks nuttigs," Snerp beklemtoon die woord effens, "vir die Orde doen nie."

Dis Sirius se beurt om te bloos. Snerp se lip krul triomfantlik toe hy na Harry kyk.

"Die skoolhoof het my hierheen gestuur om vir jou te sê, Potter, dat hy wil hê jy moet hierdie kwartaal Okklumensie bestudeer."

"Wat bestudeer?" vra Harry verward.

Snerp se snedige glimlaggie verdiep.

“Okklumensie, Potter. Die magiese verdediging van die verstand teen indringing van buite. ’n Beskeie afdeling van die toorkuns, maar nietemin baie nuttig.”

Harry se hart klop nou baie vinnig. Verdediging teen indringing van buite? Maar hy is nie besete nie, almal het saamgestem –

“Hoekom moet ek Okklu- wat ook al leer?”

“Omdat die skoolhoof dink dis ’n goeie idee,” sê Snerp glad. “Jy sal privaat lesse een keer per week kry, maar jy mag vir niemand vertel wat jy doen nie, allermens vir Dolores Umbridge.”

“Goed,” sê Harry. “Wie gaan dit vir my leer?”

Snerp lig ’n wenkbrou.

“Ek gaan.”

Dit voel vir Harry of sy binnegoed smelt. Ekstra klasse by Snerp – wat op aarde het hy gedoen om dit te verdien? Hy kyk vinnig na Sirius vir ondersteuning.

“Hoekom kan Dompeldorius nie vir Harry leer nie?” vra Sirius aggressief. “Hoekom jy?”

“Dis seker die skoolhoof se voorreg om minder aangename take te deleger,” sê Snerp syrig. “Ek verseker jou ek het nie op my knieë hiervoor gevra nie.” Hy staan op. “Ek verwag jou in my kantoor Maandagaand om sesuur, Potter. As enigiemand jou vra, moet jy sê jy neem ekstra Towerdrankies. Niemand wat jou al in my klas gesien het, sal dit betwyfel nie.”

Hy swaai om en sy swart reismantel bult uit agter hom.

“Wag eers,” sê Sirius en sit regop in sy stoel.

Snerp draai terug en kyk neerhalend na hom.

“Ek is nogal haastig, Swardt. Anders as jy het ek nie onbeperkte vrye tyd nie.”

“Ek sal nie jou tyd mors nie.” Sirius kom orent. Hy is heelwat langer as Snerp en Harry sien dat Snerp se vuus in sy sak gebal is. Harry is seker dis om sy towerstaf geklem. “As ek hoor dat jy die Okklumensie-klasse gebruik om Harry se lewe moeilik te maak, sal jy met my te doen kry.”

“Hoe roerend,” sê Snerp bitsig. “Maar jy’t tog seker opgelet dat Potter baie soos sy pa is?”

“Ja, ek het,” sê Sirius trots.

“Wel, dan sal jy weet hy’s te arrogant om hom aan kritiek te steur.”

Sirius stoot sy stoel woens agteruit, ruk sy towerstaf uit en stap om die tafel na Snerp. Snerp pluk sy towerstaf ook uit. Hulle som mekaar op. Sirius lyk briesend; Snerp berekenend, sy oë dartel van Sirius se towerstaf na sy gesig.

"Sirius!" sê Harry hard, maar dit lyk nie of Sirius hom hoor nie.

"Ek waarsku jou, *Snuiverus*," sê Sirius, sy gesig amper teen Snerp s'n, "dit skeel my nie as Dompeldorius dink jy het verander nie, ek weet van beter –"

"Hoekom sê jy dit nie vir hom nie?" fluister Snerp. "Of is jy bang hy sal nie die advies aanvaar van 'n man wat reeds ses maande in sy ma se huis wegkruip nie?"

"Hoor hier, hoe gaan dit deesdae met Lucius Malfoy, hê? Hys seker in sy skik dat sy skoothondjie by Hogwarts werk, nè?"

"Gepraat van honde," kap Snerp terug, "weet jy dat Lucius Malfoy jou herken het daardie keer toe jy so lekker buite baljaar het? Oulike idee, Swardt, om jou op 'n veilige stasieperron te laat sien. Gee jou 'n waterdigte verskoning om nie weer jou wegkruipplekkie te verlaat nie, nie waar nie?"

Sirius lig sy towerstaf

"NEE!" skree Harry en spring oor die tafel. "Sirius, moenie!"

"Sê jy ek's 'n lafaard?" brul Sirius en probeer vir Harry uit die pad druk, maar hy staan vas.

"Raai, weet jy, dalk," sê Snerp.

"Harry – gee – pad!" snou Sirius en stoot hom met sy vry hand weg.

Die kombuisdeur gaan oop en die Weasley-gesin en Hermien kom binne met meneer Weasley, geklee in 'n gestreepte pak pajamas en 'n reënjas, tussen hulle. Almal lyk baie in hul skik.

"Gesond!" sê meneer Weasley trots. "Heeltemal gesond!"

Maar hy en die res van die Weasleys stop in hul spore en staar na die toneel voor hulle: Sirius en Snerp gluur na hulle, hul towerstawwe op mekaar gerig, terwyl Harry probeer om hulle uitmekaar te hou.

"Merlin se baard," sê meneer Weasley en die glimlag verdwyn van sy gesig, "wat gaan hier aan?"

Sowel Sirius as Snerp laat sak hul towerstawwe. Harry kyk van die een na die ander. Al twee se gesigte is vertrek van minagting, maar die skielike binnekoms van so baie mense het hulle tot bedaring gedwing. Snerp steek sy towerstaf in sy sak, swaai om en swiep deur die kombuis verby die Weasleys sonder om 'n woord te sê. Hy gaan staan in die deur en kyk terug.

"Maandagaand, sesuur, Potter."

Toe is hy weg. Sirius gluur hom agterna, sy towerstaf slap langs sy sy.

"Wat gaan aan?" vra meneer Weasley weer.

"Niks, Arthur." Sirius haal swaar asem asof hy pas 'n ver ent

hardloop het. "Net 'n vriendelike gesprek tussen twee ou skoolmaats." Hy glimlag met groot inspanning. "So . . . dan is jy gesond? Dis wonderlike nuus, regtig wonderlik."

"Ja, is dit nie?" Mevrouw Weasley stuur haar man na 'n stoel. "Heler sinetwyk se towerkuns het geseëvier. Hy't 'n teenmiddel gekry vir wat daardie slang ook al in sy slagande het, en Arthur het sy les geleer met Moggelmedisyne, of hoe, Arthur?" eindig sy kwaai.

"Ja, Molly, skat," sê meneer Weasley gedwee.

Aandete behoort 'n feestelike geleentheid te wees nou dat meneer Weasley weer in hul midde is, en Harry kan sien dat Sirius sy besloen, maar hy verval in buierige stiltes wanneer hy nie homself forseer om vir Fred en George se grappe te lag of vir iemand nog kos aan te bied nie. Mundungus en Maloog, wat meneer Weasley voorspoed kom toewens het, sit tussen hom en Harry. Harry wil bitter graag vir Sirius sê hy moet hom nie aan Snerp steur nie, dat Snerp hom met opset tart en dat die res van hulle nie dink hy is 'n lafaard omdat hy Dompeldorius se opdrag gehoorsaam en in Grimmauldplein bly nie. Maar daar is nie 'n geleentheid nie en boonop is Sirius só iesegrimmig dat Harry nie regtig die moed het om iets vir hom te sê selfs al sou hy 'n kans gehad het nie. Hy vertel dus saggies vir Ron en Hermien dat Snerp vir hom Okklumensie-lesse gaan gee.

"Dompeldorius wil hê jy moenie meer oor Woldemort droom nie," sê Hermien dadelik. "Wel, jy sal nie spyt wees as dit ophou nie, nè?"

"Ekstra klasse by Snerp?" sê Ron geskok. "Ek vat eerder die nagmerries!"

Die plan is dat hulle die volgende dag met die Ridderbus na Hogwarts sal gaan, weer eens vergesel van Tonks en Lupin. Toe Harry, Ron en Hermien die volgende oggend ondertoe gaan vir ontbyt, sit Tonks en Lupin reeds en eet. Hulle kyk op en bly vinnig stil asof hulle iets fluisterend bespreek het.

Ná 'n gejaagde ontbyt trek almal baadjies en serpe teen die koue, grys Januarie-oggend aan. Harry voel vreemd benoud. Hy wil nie vir Sirius tot siens sê nie. Hy voel nie lekker oor hierdie afskeid nie. Hy weet nie wanneer hulle mekaar weer gaan sien nie en hy voel hy moet iets vir Sirius sê om te keer dat hy 'n onbesonne ding doen. Wat as Snerp se beskuldigings Sirius so gekwets het dat hy Grimmauldplein verlaat en iets roekeloos aanvang? Maar Sirius wink hom nader voor hy weet wat om te sê.

"Neem dit," sê hy saggies en druk 'n slordig toegedraaide pakkie so groot soos 'n slapbandboek in Harry se hande.

"Wat is dit?" vra Harry.

“’n Manier om my te laat weet as Snerp mislik is met jou. Nee, moet dit nie hier oopmaak nie!” Sirius kyk vlugtig na waar mevrou Weasley die tweeling probeer oorreed om hul handgebreide duimhandskoene aan te trek. “Ek glo nie Molly sal hiervan hou nie – maar gebruik dit as jy my nodig het, oukei?”

“Oukei.” Harry steek die pakkie in sy baadjie se binnesak. Hy weet hy sal dit nie gebruik nie, wat dit ook al is. Hy gaan nie vir Sirius uit sy skuilplek lok nie, al is Snerp ook hoe goor met hom tydens die lesse.

“Kom ons gaan,” sê Sirius en klap vir Harry met ’n grimmige lag op die skouer. Voor Harry iets kan sê, is hulle op pad boontoe en staan hulle, omring van Weasleys, voor die voordeur wat met swaar kettings en slotte gesluit is.

“Tot siens, Harry, en wees versigtig,” sê mevrou Weasley toe sy hom omhels.

“Sien jou, Harry, en wees op die uitkyk vir slange!” sê meneer Weasley hartlik en skud sy hand.

“Ja – goed,” sê Harry afgetrokke. Dis sy laaste kans om vir Sirius te maan om versigtig te wees. Hy draai om, kyk in sy peetpa se oë en maak sy mond oop, maar Sirius slaan een arm om sy skouers en sê skor: “Pas jouself op, Harry.” Die volgende oomblik staan Harry buite in die ysige winterlug, terwyl Tonks (vermom soos ’n lang vrou met staalgrys hare in ’n tweedjas) hom met die trappe af jaag.

Nommer 12 se deur slaan agter hulle toe. Hulle volg Lupin met die treetjies af ondertoe. By die sypaadjie kyk Harry om. Nummer 12 smelt vinnig weg terwyl die huise aan weerskante rek, sodat dit binne ’n oogwenk nie meer daar is nie.

“Komaan, hoe gouer ons op die bus is, hoe beter,” sê Tonks, wat senuweeagtig rondkyk. Lupin wuif met sy regterarm.

BOEM.

’n Helderpers driedekkerbus verskyn voor hulle en mis die naaste lamppaal, wat uit die pad spring, rakelings.

’n Maer seun met puisies en groot bakore in ’n pers uniform spring af na die sypaadjie en sê: “Welkom by die –”

“Ja, ja, ons weet, dankie,” sê Tonks vinnig. “In, in, maak gou –”

Sy stoot Harry met die treetjies op boontoe, verby die kondukteur wat met groot oë na hom staar.

“Hei – dis Har—!”

“Sê net sy naam en ek toor jou in jou peetje in,” brom Tonks dreigend terwyl sy vir Ginny en Hermien inhelp.

“Ek wou nog altyd met hierdie ding reis,” sê Ron in sy noppies toe hy by Harry kom en om hom rondkyk.

Die vorige keer toe Harry met die Ridderbus gery het, was dit aand en die drie dekke was vol koperbeddens. Nou is dit vroegoggend en allerhande soorte stoele staan om die vensters rond. Dit lyk of party omgeval het toe die bus so skielik in Grimmauldplein gestop het: 'n paar hekse en towenaars kom brom-bromorent en iemand se inkopiesak het oopgebars. 'n Nare mengsel van padda-eiers, kakkerlakke en vlaroomkoekies lê gesaai oor die vloer.

“Dit lyk my ons moet verdeel,” sê Tonks saaklik. Sy kyk rond op soek na leë stoele. “Fred, George en Ginny, as julle daar agter sal gaan sit . . . Remus sal by julle bly.”

Tonks, Harry, Ron en Hermien gaan na die boonste dek. Daar is twee beskikbare stoele heel voor en twee heel agter. Daan Tolvermeyer, die kondukteur, stap nuuskierig agter Harry en Ron aan. Die koppe draai toe Harry verbystap, maar toe hy gaan sit, kyk almal vinnig vorentoe.

Harry en Ron gee elkeen vir Daan elf Sekels en die bus trek swaai-swaai weg. Dit rammel om Grimmauldplein, hink op en af teen die randsteen en toe, met 'n tamaai BOEM, word almal agteroor geslinger. Ron se stoel val om en Pigwidgeon, wat op sy skoot gesit het, bars uit sy hok, vlieg kwetterend tot heel voor en gaan sit op Hermien se skouer. Harry het net betyds 'n kersklamp beetgekry en darem nie omgeval nie. Hy sien deur die venster dat hulle nou met 'n breë pad al jaag.

“Net buite Birmingham,” sê Daan vrolik terwyl Ron opsukkel. “Is jy oukei, Harry? Ek het jou naam laas somer 'n klomp keer in die koerant gesien, maar dit was nooit juis iets moois nie. Ek sê vir Ernst, ek sê, hy't nie so getik gelyk toe ons hom ontmoet het nie, wys jou net, nè?”

Hy gee hulle kaartjies terug, maar staar nog steeds geboeid na Harry. Dit lyk nie of Daan omgee as iemand mal is nie, solank hy net beroemd is en die koerant haal. Die Ridderbus swaai senutergend toe hulle aan die verkeerde kant verby 'n ry motors gaan. Harry sien hoe Hermien haar hande oor haar oë slaan terwyl Pigwidgeon tevrede op haar skouer sit en swaai.

BOEM.

Die stoele skuif weer agteruit toe die Ridderbus van die Birmingham-pad na 'n stil plaaspaadjie vol haarnaalddraaie spring. Hulle sny die draaie só wild dat die heinings uit die pad moet spring. Hulle beweeg, elke keer met 'n harde BOEM, deur 'n besige hoofstraat, oor 'n boogbrug tussen hoë heuwels na 'n winderige pad tussen lang woonstelblokke.

“Ek het van plan verander,” sê Ron toe hy die sesde keer opstaan. “Ek wil nooit weer in hierdie ding ry nie.”

“Hoor hier, die volgende halte is Hogwarts,” sê Daan vrolik terwyl hy swaai-swaai nader kom. “Daai kwaai vrou wat saam met julle opgeklim het, het vir ons ’n footjie gegee as ons julle gouer sal aflaai. Ons stop net eers gou vir Madame Marsch –” Harry hoor hoe iemand op die tweede dek braak, gevolg deur nare spatgeluide, “sy voel nie lekker nie.”

Die Ridderbus kom ’n paar minute later met skreeuende remme voor ’n kroegie tot stilstand, wat vinnig padgee om ’n botsing te voorkom. Hulle hoor hoe Daan vir Madame Marsch uit die bus help en hoe die ander passasiers op die tweede dek verlig brom. Die bus rol vorentoe, tel spoed op en –

BOEM.

Hulle rol deur ’n sneeubedekte Hogsmeade. Harry sien ’n glimp van Die Swynenes in die systraatjie. Die uithangbord met die afgesnyde wildevarkkop kraak in die wind. Spikkels sneeu vlek die bus se groot venster. Uiteindelik hou hulle voor Hogwarts se hekke stil.

Lupin en Tonks gee hand met hul bagasie en klim af om hulle te groet. Toe Harry omkyk, sien hy hoe die passasiers hul neuse teen die ruite druk en na hulle staar.

“Julle sal veilig wees sodra julle op die terrein is.” Tonks hou die verlate pad agterdogtig dop. “Geniet die kwartaal, oukei?”

“Wees versigtig,” sê Lupin en skud almal se hande, Harry s’n heel laaste. “Hoor hier, Harry...” hy laat sak sy stem terwyl die ander vir Tonks groet, “ek weet jy hou nie van Snerp nie, maar hy’s ’n uitstekende Okklumens en ons almal – Sirius inkluis – wil hê jy moet leer om jouself te beskerm. Werk dus hard daaraan, oukei?”

Harry kyk op in Lupin se beplooide gesig. “Ja, goed,” sê hy bedruk. “Sien jou.”

Die sesstuks sleep hul trommels met groot moeite met die gladde rypad op na die kasteel. Hermien praat reeds oor al die elfhoede wat sy nog voor slaaptid wil brei. Toe hulle by die eikehoutdeure kom, kyk Harry om. Die Ridderbus is weg en die gedagte aan wat môreaand op hom wag, laat hom wens dat hy nog aan boord was.

Die hele Maandag bekommer Harry hom oor wat voorlê. Die oggend se dubbele Towerdrankie-klas verlig nie sy angs nie. Snerp is sy ou onplesierige self. En die DS-lede wat tussen klasse in die gange vir Harry vra of hulle daardie aand ’n byeenkoms gaan hê, laat hom net goorder voel.

“Ek sal julle laat weet wanneer die volgende een is,” moet hy oor

en oor sê. "Ek kan nie vanaand nie, ek het – hm – ekstra Towerdrankies."

"Jy het *ekstra Towerdrankies*?" sê Sagrys Smit neerhalend toe hy vir Harry ná middagete in die ingangsportaal voorkeer. "Jy moet omrent vrot wees! Snerp gee nie sommer ekstra klasse nie."

Smit lyk baie in sy skik toe hy wegstap en Ron gluur hom agterna. "Sal ek hom toor? Ek kan hom nog van hier af kry," sê hy en rig sy towerstaf op Smit se skouerblaaië.

"Los dit," sê Harry nors. "Dis wat almal gaan dink, hè? Dat ek dom –"

"Hallo, Harry," sê 'n stem agter hom. Hy swaai om en sien dis Cho.

"O," sê Harry en sy maag spring ongemaklik. "Hallo."

"Ons kry jou in die biblioteek, Harry," sê Hermien. Sy gryp Ron se elmboog en sleep hom na die trappe.

"Het jy lekker Kersfees gehou?" vra Cho.

"Ja, dit was oukei," sê Harry.

"Ons s'n was maar stil." Cho lyk verleë. "Hm . . . daar's volgende maand weer 'n Hogsmeade-naweek, het jy die kennisgewing gesien?"

"Wat? O, nee, ek was nog nie naby die kennisgewingbord vandat ons terug is nie."

"Wel, daar is. Op Valentynsdag . . ."

"O," sê Harry, wat wonder hoekom sy dit vir hom sê. "Wel, jy wil –"

"Net as jy wil," sê sy gretig.

Harry staar na haar. Hy wou sê: "Jy wil seker weet wanneer ons volgende DS-byeenkoms is?" maar dis duidelik nie wat sy verstaan het nie.

"Ek – hm –" sê hy.

"O, as jy nie wil nie, dan's dit oukei," sê sy en lyk gekrenk. "Moenie daaroor worrie nie. Ek – ek – sien jou later!"

Sy stap vinnig weg. Harry se oë volg haar terwyl sy brein vinnig werk. Dan dring dit tot hom deur.

"Cho! Haai – CHO!"

Hy sit haar agterna en haal haar halfpad op met die marmertrappe in.

"Hm – wil jy dalk op Valentynsdag saam met my Hogsmeade toe gaan?"

"Ooo, ja!" Sy bloos bloedrooi en kyk stralend na hom.

"Goed . . . oukei . . . dan's dit afgespreek," sê Harry, en toe hy biblioteek toe draf om saam met Ron en Hermien na hul middag-klasse te gaan, voel hy dat die dag tog nie so 'n totale misoes is nie.

Maar toe hy daardie aand net voor ses na Snerp se kantoor stap, voel hy baie benoud. Selfs die gloed nadat Cho Chang ingestem het om saam met hom uit te gaan, laat hom nie minder angstig voel nie.

Hy gaan staan voor die deur, trek sy asem diep in, klop en stap in. Die skaduagtige vertrek is vol rakke met honderde glasflesse waarin slymerige reste van diere en plante in gekleurde tower-vloeistowwe dryf. In een hoek staan die kas vol bestanddele wat Harry, volgens Snerp, eenkeer besteel het. Maar dis die lessenaar wat Harry se aandag trek. 'n Vlak klipbak gegraveer met runes en simbole staan daarop in 'n poel kerslig. Harry weet dadelik wat dit is – Dompeldorius se Peinssif. Hy wonder nog wat dit daar soek toe Snerp se koue stem uit die skaduwees kom.

“Maak die deur agter jou toe, Potter.”

Harry doen dit. Dit voel of hy homself in 'n tronksel toesluit. Toe hy omdraai, staan Snerp in die lig en wys sonder 'n woord na die stoel oorkant sy lessenaar. Harry gaan sit en so ook Snerp, sy koue swart oë op Harry, sy gesig vertrek van weersin.

“Wel, Potter, jy weet hoekom jy hier is. Die skoolhoof wil hê ek moet vir jou Okklumensie leer. Ek kan net hoop dat jy beter sal vaar as met Towerdrankies.”

“Ja,” sê Harry kortaf.

Snerp se oë vernou. “Hoewel dit nie 'n gewone klas is nie, Potter, is ek nog steeds jou onderwyser. Jy sal my te alle tye ‘meneer’ of ‘professor’ noem.”

“Ja . . . meneer,” sê Harry.

Snerp staar nog steeds deur vernoude oë na hom. Dan sê hy: “Goed, Okklumensie. Soos ek vir jou in jou liewe peetpa se kombuis gesê het, word hierdie afdeling van die towerkuns gebruik om die verstand te verseël teen magiese indringing en beïnvloeding.”

“Hoekom dink professor Dompeldorius ek het dit nodig, meneer?” Harry kyk stip na Snerp terwyl hy wonder wat sy antwoord gaan wees.

Snerp kyk 'n rukkie na hom voor hy verkleinerend sê: “Selfs jy moes dit darem seker teen hierdie tyd uitgewerk het, Potter. Die Donker Heer is besonder vaardig met Legilimensie –”

“Wat is dit? Meneer?”

“Dit is die vermoë om gevoelens en herinnerings uit 'n ander persoon se verstand te trek –”

“Hy lees gedagtes?” sê Harry vinnig, sy ergste vrese bewaarheid.

“Jy't geen subtiliteit nie, Potter.” Snerp se donker oë skitter. “Jy't geen aanvoeling vir die fyner onderskeidings nie. Dis een van die tekortkominge wat maak dat jy so treurig met Towerdrankies is.”

Snerp bly 'n rukkie stil voor hy voortgaan, asof hy hom daarin verkneukel om Harry te beledig.

“Net Moggels praat van ‘gedagtes lees’. Die brein is nie 'n boek wat na willekeur oopgemaak en op jou gemak bestudeer kan word nie. Gedagtes word nie aan die binnekant van ons skedels neergeskryf waar 'n indringer hulle kan lees nie. Die brein is 'n komplekse orgaan, Potter – ten minste, die meeste breine is.” Hy grynslag. “Dis egipties waar dat diegene wat Legilimensie bemeester het, in staat is om onder sekere omstandighede in hul slagoffers se verstand te delf en hul bevindings korrek te interpreteer. Die Donker Heer weet hyvoorbeeld feitlik altyd wanneer iemand vir hom lieg. Slegs diegene wat bedrewe is met Okklumensie kan sekere gevoelens en herinnerings afsluit en in sy teenwoordigheid lieg sonder om betrap te word.”

Ten spyte van wat Snerp sê, klink Legilimensie nog steeds vir Harry soos gedagtes lees, en hy hou net mooi niks van die idee nie.

“Dan weet hy wat ons nou dink? Meneer?”

“Die Donker Heer is ver hiervandaan en Hogwarts se mure en terrein word beskerm deur antieke towerspreuke en paljasse wat die liggaamlike en verstandelike veiligheid van die inwoners verseker,”

sê Snerp. “Tyd en ruimte tel in die towerkuns, Potter. Oogkontak is dikwels noodsaaklik vir Legilimensie.”

“Maar hoekom moet ek Okklumensie leer?”

Snerp kyk na Harry terwyl hy een lang, dun vinger oor sy lippe trek.

“Dit lyk of die gewone reëls nie vir jou geld nie, Potter. Dit lyk of die vloek wat jou nie kon doodmaak nie, die een of ander verbintenis tussen jou en die Donker Heer gesmee het. Wanneer jou brein ontspanne en kwesbaar is – soos wanneer jy slaap – deel jy die Donker Heer se gedagtes en emosies. Die skoolhoof wil nie hê dit moet voortduur nie. Hy wil hê jy moet leer hoe om jou verstand teen die Donker Heer te sluit.”

Harry se hart klop weer vinnig. Niks maak regtig sin nie.

“Maar hoekom wil professor Dompeldorius hê dit moet ophou?” vra hy kortaf. “Dis nie lekker nie, maar dit was nuttig, nie waar nie? Ek bedoel . . . ek het gesien hoe daardie slang vir meneer Weasley aanval en toe kon professor Dompeldorius hom red.”

Snerp staar nog 'n paar sekondes na Harry. Sy vinger speel nog steeds oor sy lippe. Toe hy weer praat, is dit stadig en nadruklik, asof hy elke woord oorweeg.

“Dit wil voorkom of die Donker Heer tot onlangs onbewus was van hierdie band tussen jou en hom. Jy het sy emosies en gedagtes

tot nou toe gedeel sonder dat hy dit geweet het. Maar die gesig wat jy kort voor Kersfees – ”

“Die een met die slang en meneer Weasley?”

“Moenie my in die rede val nie, Potter,” sê Snerp in ’n gevaarlike stem. “Soos ek gesê het, die gesig wat jy kort voor Kersfees gesien het, was só ’n drastiese binnedringing van die Donker Heer se gedagtes – ”

“Ek het in die slang se kop gekyk, nie syne nie!”

“Ek dag ek het gesê jy moet my nie in die rede val nie, Potter?”

Maar dit kan Harry nie skeel dat Snerp hom vererg nie. Uiteindelik begin dinge vir hom duidelik word. Hy skuif vorentoe sodat hy, sonder dat hy dit eens agterkom, op die punt van sy stoel sit: gespanne, asof gereed om te vlug.

“Hoekom het ek deur die slang se oë gekyk as ek Woldemort se gedagtes gedeel het?”

“Moenie die Donker Heer se naam sê nie!” snou Snerp.

Daar volg ’n gespanne stilte. Hulle gluur oor die Peinssif na mekaar.

“Professor Dompeldorius sê sy naam,” sê Harry stilweg.

“Dompeldorius is ’n baie magtige towenaar,” prewel Snerp. “Hoe-wel hy die naam met vertroue kan gebruik, kan die res van ons . . . ” Hy vryf sy linkervoorarm onbewustelik op die plek waar Harry weet die Donker Merk in sy vel ingebrand is.

“Ek wil net weet,” begin Harry weer en hy dwing sy stem om hoflik te klink, “hoekom – ”

“Jy het die slang se brein binnegedring omdat die Donker Heer op daardie oomblik in die slang was,” snou Snerp. “Die slang was deur hom besete, dus het jy gedroom jy was ook binne-in.”

“En Wol – hy – hy’t geweet ek was daar?”

“Dit lyk so,” sê Snerp kil.

“Hoe weet julle dit?” vra Harry dringend. “Raai professor Dompeldorius net, of –?”

“Ek het reeds vir jou gesê,” Snerp sit penregop in sy stoel, “om vir my ‘meneer’ te sê.”

“Ja, meneer,” sê Harry ongeduldig. “Maar hoe weet julle – ”

“Dis genoeg dat ons weet,” sê Snerp gedemp. “Wat van belang is, is dat die Donker Heer nou weet jy het toegang tot sy gedagtes en gevoelens. Hy het ook afgelei dat die proses in albei rigtings kan werk, dat hy op sy beurt toegang tot jou gedagtes en gevoelens het – ”

“En hy sal probeer om my goed te laat doen?” vra Harry. “Meneer?” voeg hy vinnig by.

“Dalk,” sê Snerp koud en onverskillig. “Wat ons terugbring by Okklumensie.”

Snerp haal sy towerstaf uit sy kleed se binnesak en Harry sit gespanne op sy stoel, maar Snerp lig bloot die towerstaf na sy slaap en druk die punt tussen sy olierige hare in. Toe hy dit uittrek, hang daar 'n silwer draad tussen sy slaap en die towerstaf se punt. Die draad breek af toe hy die towerstaf wegtrek en val dartelend in die Peinssif. Dis nie 'n gas nie, maar ook nie 'n vloeistof nie en dit draai silwer-wit. Snerp hou sy towerstaf nog twee keer teen sy slaap en laat val die silwer stof in die klipbak. Toe tel hy die Peinssif versigtig op, sit dit op 'n rak buite hul bereik en kyk sonder om enigiets te verduidelik na Harry, sy towerstaf gereed voor hom.

“Staan op en haal jou towerstaf uit, Potter.”

Harry staan senuagtig op. Hulle gluur oor die lessenaar na mekaar.

“Jy mag jou towerstaf gebruik om my te ontwapen of om jouself na goëddünke te beskerm,” sê Snerp.

“Wat gaan gebeur?” Harry kyk wantrouig na Snerp se towerstaf.

“Ek gaan probeer om jou verstand binne te dring,” sê Snerp sag. “Ons sal sien hoe goed jy jou teësit. Ek het verneem dat jy die Imperius-vloek nogal goed weerstaan. Jy sal vind dat jy soortgelyke magte hiervoor moet hê . . . gereed. *Legilimens!*”

Snerp het toegeslaan voor Harry gereed was, nog voor hy enige vorm van weerstand kon bymeakaarskraap. Die kantoor swem voor sy oë en raak weg. Beeld ná beeld storm soos 'n flikkerende film deur sy brein, só helder dat hy verblind is vir wat om hom aan gaan.

Hy is vyf en sien hoe Dudley op 'n nuwe rooi fiets ry en sy hart wil breek van jaloesie . . . hy is nege en Ripper die bulhond jaag hom in 'n boom op terwyl die Dursleys op die gras staan en lag. Hy sit onder die Sorteelhoed wat sê dat hy goed in Slibberin sal vaar . . . Hermien lê in die hospitaalvleuel, haar gesig vol digte swart hare . . . 'n honderd Dementors sluip nader by die donker meer. Cho Chang kom na hom onder die mistel . . .

Nee, sê 'n stem in Harry se kop terwyl die herinnering aan Cho helderder word, *jy gaan nie hierna kyk nie, dis privaat* –

Hy voel 'n skerp pyn in sy knie. Snerp se kantoor word sigbaar en hy besef hy het geval en sy knie hard teen Snerp se lessenaar gekap. Hy kyk op. Snerp het sy towerstaf laat sak en vryf 'n rooi swelsel soos 'n brandmerk op sy pols.

“Het jy die Brandvloek met opset gedoen?” vra Snerp kil.

“Nee,” sê Harry bitter terwyl hy opstaan.

“Ek het so gedink.” Snerp kyk stup na hom. “Jy't my te ver ingelaat. Jy't beheer verloor.”

“Kon jy alles sien wat ek gesien het?” vra Harry, wat eintlik liever nie wil weet nie.

“Flitse daarvan,” sê Snerp en sy lip krul. “Wie se hond was dit?”

“My tante Marge,” sê Harry en haat vir Snerp.

“Vir ’n eerste poging was dit nie te sleg nie.” Snerp lig weer sy towerstaf. “Jy kon my darem afweer, hoewel jy tyd en energie ver-spil het met daardie sinnelose geskree. Jy moet fokus. Weer my met jou verstand af, dan sal dit nie nodig wees om jou towerstaf te gebruik nie.”

“Ek probeer,” sê Harry snedig, “maar jy sê nie vir my hoe nie!”

“Maniere, Potter,” sê Snerp gevaarlik. “Goed, maak toe jou oë.”

Harry gee hom ’n vuil kyk voor hy hom gehoorsaam. Dis nie lekker om met toe oë te staan terwyl Snerp towerstaf in die hand reg voor jou staan nie.

“Maak jou gedagtes skoon, Potter,” sê Snerp se koue stem. “Laat los alle emosie . . .”

Maar Harry se woede teenoor Snerp pols soos gif deur sy are. Laat los alle emosie? Dit sal makliker wees om sy bene af te sny.

“Jy maak nie soos ek sê nie, Potter . . . Jy moet meer gedissipli-neerd wees . . . Fokus . . .”

Harry probeer om sy verstand leeg te maak, probeer om nie te dink, te onthou, te voel nie . . .

“Kom ons probeer weer . . . Ek tel drie . . . een – twee – drie – Legilimens!”

’n Groot swart draak doem voor hom op . . . sy pa en ma waai vir hom uit ’n betowerde spieël . . . Cedric Diggory lê op die grond en kyk met starende oë na hom . . .

“NEEEEEEE!”

Harry is weer op sy knieë, sy gesig in sy hande, sy kop pyn asof iemand sy brein uit sy skedel wil skeur.

“Staan op!” sê Snerp skril. “Staan op! Jy probeer nie, jy wend geen poging aan nie. Jy gee my toegang tot herinnerings wat jy vrees, jy gee my wapens!”

Harry staan op. Sy hart klop wild asof hy werklik vir Cedric dood in die begraafplaas gesien het. Snerp lyk bleker as gewoonlik en kwater, hoewel nie naastenby so kwaad soos Harry nie.

“Ek pro-beer,” sê hy deur sy geknersde tande.

“Ek het gesê jy moet alle emosie opsy skuif!”

“O ja? Wel, dis nie so maklik op die oomblik nie,” snou Harry.

“Dan sal jy ’n maklike prooi vir die Donker Heer wees!” sê Snerp genadeloos. “Dwase wat hul harte op hul mou dra, wat nie hulle emosies beheer nie, wat pynlike herinnerings met hulle saamdra en

hulle met soveel gemak laat kwaad maak – kortom, swak mense – staan nie 'n kans teen sy magte nie! Hy sal jou verstand doodmaklik binnedring, Potter!”

“Ek is nie swak nie,” sê Harry in 'n skor stem. Woede pols deur hom. Hy voel of hy vir Snerp binne oomblikke kan aanval.

“Bewys dit dan! Beheer jouself!” spoeg Snerp. “Beheer jou woede, dissiplineer jou verstand! Ons probeer weer. Gereed: *Legilimens!*”

Hy sien hoe oom Vernon die posbus toespyker . . . 'n honderd Dementors sweef oor die meer na hom . . . hy hardloop saam met meneer Weasley deur 'n gang sonder vensters . . . hulle kom al nader aan die swart deur aan die onderpunt van die gang . . . Harry verwag dat hulle daar sal ingaan, maar meneer Weasley neem hom na links, af met 'n stel kliptrappe . . .

“EK WEET! EK WEET!”

Hy staan weer hande viervoet op die vloer in Snerp se kantoor, sy litteken kriel onplesierig, maar die stem wat oor sy lippe gebars het, is triomfantlik. Hy hys homself op en sien dat Snerp met 'n geligte towerstaf na hom staar. Dit lyk asof Snerp die paljas laat vaar het voor Harry hom kon teësit.

“Wat het gebeur, Potter?” Hy kyk stip na Harry.

“Ek het gesien – ek het onthou,” blaas Harry. “Ek het so pas besef . . .”

“Wat besef?” vra Snerp skerp.

Harry antwoord nie dadelik nie. Hy vryf sy voorkop terwyl hy die verblindende oomblik toe alles vir hom duidelik geword het, herleef.

Hy droom al maande lank van 'n gang sonder vensters en 'n deur wat gesluit is. Dit het nog nie een keer by hom opgekom dat die plek werklik bestaan nie. Maar die herinnering wat hy so pas beleef het, het hom laat besef dis die gang waarlangs hy en meneer Weasley op die twaalfde Augustus gehardloop het om by die hofsaal te kom. Dis die gang wat na die Departement vir Geheime in die Ministerie vir Towerkuns lei. En dis waar meneer Weasley deur Woldemort se slang aangeval is.

Hy kyk na Snerp.

“Wat is in die Departement vir Geheime?”

“Wat sê jy daar?” vra Snerp sag en Harry kry lekker toe hy sien dat Snerp ontsenu is.

“Ek het gevra wat in die Departement vir Geheime is, meneer.”

“En hoekom,” sê Snerp stadig, “wil jy weet?”

“Omdat,” sê Harry en hy hou Snerp se gesig fyn dop, “ek daardie gang wat ek so pas gesien het – die gang waarvan ek al maande lank

droom – so pas herken het. Dit le na die Departement vir Geheime
... en ek dink daar is iets wat Woldemort wil hê – ”

“Ek het gesê jy moenie die Donker Heer se naam gebruik nie!”

Hulle gluur na mekaar. Harry se litteken is weer seer, maar dit
traak hom nie. Snerp lyk omgekrap, maar toe hy praat, is dit
duidelik dat hy sy bes doen om kalm en onbesorg te klink.

“Daar is baie dinge in die Departement vir Geheime, Potter, wat
jy nie verstaan nie en wat jou in elk geval nie aangaan nie. Is dit
duidelik?”

“Ja,” sê Harry en vryf sy tintelende litteken wat al seerder word.

“Sorg dat jy Woensdag hier is. Dieselfde tyd. Dan sal ons dit ver-
der voer.”

“Goed,” sê Harry, wat desperaat is om uit Snerp se kantoor te
kom sodat hy met Ron en Hermien kan praat.

“Maak jou verstand leeg van alle emosie elke nag voor jy gaan
slaap. Maak dit skoon en kalm. Het jy dit?”

“Ja,” sê Harry, maar hy luister skaars.

“En wees gewaarsku, Potter ... ek sal weet as jy nie ge oefen het
nie ... ”

“Reg so,” prewel Harry. Hy tel sy skoolsak op, swaai dit oor sy
skouer en stap vinnig na die deur. Hy maak dit oop en kyk om.
Snerp is besig om sy gedagtes met sy towerstaf se punt uit die
Peinssif te lig en versigtig terug in sy kop te plaas. Harry stap son-
der ’n woord uit en maak die deur saggies agter hom toe. Sy litteken
pyn nog steeds.

Hy kry vir Ron en Hermien in die biblioteek, besig om Umbridge
se mees onlangse huiswerk te doen. Ander studente, byna almal
vyfdejaars, sit by lampverligte tafels met hul neuse in die boeke en
maak notas met hul veerpenne. Die lug buite die kasteel se vensters
word al swarter. Die enigste ander geluid is die geskwiek van
Madame Pince, die bibliotekaresse, se skoene. Sy patroleer die
gange tussen die tafels en hou haar kosbare boeke jaloers dop.

Harry voel bewurig en koorsig en sy litteken is nog steeds seer.
Toe hy tussen Ron en Hermien gaan sit, sien hy sy weerkaatsing in
die ruit aan die oorkant. Hy is bleek en sy litteken staan skerp uit
as gewoonlik.

“Hoe was dit?” fluister Hermien. Sy lyk bekommerd: “Is jy oukei,
Harry?”

“Ja ... hm ... ek dink so,” sê Harry, ongeduldig en krimp ineen
toe ’n steekpyn deur sy litteken skiet. “Hoor hier ... ek het nou net
iets besef ... ”

Hy vertel hulle wat hy gesien het en wat hy vermoed.

"Dan . . . so jy sê . . ." fluister Ron terwyl Madame Pince skwiekskwiek verbystap, "die wapen – die ding wat Jy-Weet-Wie wil hê – is in die Ministerie vir Towerkuns?"

"In die Departement vir Geheime," fluister Harry. "Ek het daardie deur gesien toe jou pa my na die hofsaal geneem het. Dis dieselfde deur wat hy opgepas het toe die slang hom gepik het."

Hermien blaas haar asem stadig uit.

"Natuurlik," sê sy.

"Natuurlik wat?" vra Ron ongeduldig.

"Ron, dink daaroor. . . . Sturgis Podmore het by 'n deur by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns probeer inbreek . . . dit moet daardie een wees, dis net té toevallig!"

"Hoekom sou Sturgis probeer inbreek het as hy aan ons kant is?" vra Ron.

"Wel, ek weet nie," erken Hermien. "Dit is 'n bietjie vreemd . . ."

"So wat is in die Departement vir Geheime?" vra Harry vir Ron. "Het jou pa al ooit iets daaroor gesê?"

"Ek weet hulle noem die mense wat daar werk die 'Onbekryflikes,'" sê Ron fronsend, "omdat niemand regtig weet wat hulle doen nie – maar dis 'n vreemde plek om 'n wapen te hou."

"Dis nie vreemd nie, dit maak volkome sin," sê Hermien. "Ek sou sê dis iets wat topgeheim is, iets wat die Ministerie ontwikkel het . . . Harry, is jy seker jys oukei?"

Harry vryf sy voorkop hard met albei hande asof hy iets probeer uitstryk.

"Ja . . . ja . . ." Hy laat sak sy hande wat nog steeds bewe. "Ek voel net 'n bietjie . . . ek hou nie van Okklumensie nie!"

"Enigeen sal bewerig voel as sy verstand oor en oor aangeval word," sê Hermien simpatiek. "Hoor hier, kom ons gaan terug geselskamer toe, ons sal daar gemakliker wees."

Maar die geselskamer is stampvol mense wat skree en lag. Fred en George is besig om hul jongste produk vir die grapwinkel te demonstreer.

"Koplose hoedel!" skree George terwyl Fred 'n punthoed met 'n donsige pienk veer vir almal wys. "Twee Galjoene elk. Hou vir Fred dop!"

Fred sit die hoed met 'n swierige gebaar op sy kop. Vir 'n oomblik lyk hy bloot koddig. Dan verdwyn sowel die hoed as sy kop. 'n Paar meisies skree, maar die res brul van die lag.

"En weer terug!" sê George. Fred se hand tas in die lug bo sy skouers rond. Dan swiep hy die hoed af en sy kop is ook weer daar.

"Hoe werk daardie hoede?" vra Hermien, haar aandag vir 'n ver-

andering nie by haar huiswerk nie. "Ek bedoel, dis beslis die een of ander Onsigbaarheidspaljas, maar dis nogal slim dat die onsigbaarheidsveld verby die grense van die betowerde voorwerp strek . . . ek glo nie daardie towerspreuk gaan lank hou nie."

Harry antwoord nie. Hy voel naar.

"Ek sal dit môre doen," mompel hy en druk die boeke wat hy pas uitgehaal het terug in sy sak.

"Skryf dit in jou huiswerkboek neer!" moedig Hermien hom aan. "Sodat jy nie vergeet nie!"

Harry en Ron loer na mekaar terwyl Harry sy huiswerkbeplanner uithaal en dit huiwerig oopmaak.

"Stel nooit uit tot later, want hoe later hoe kwater!" skel die boek toe hy. Umbridge se huiswerk neerskryf. Hermien straal.

"Ek gaan slaap." Harry druk die huiswerkbeplanner in sy sak met die vaste voorneme om dit so gou moontlik in die vuur te laat val.

Hy stap deur die geselskamer na die koel kliptrappe wat na die seuns se slaapsale lei en ontwyk vir George, wat 'n koplose hoed op sy kop probeer sit. Hy voel weer naar, net soos die nag toe hy die gesig van die slang gesien het. As hy net 'n rukkie kan lê, sal hy beter voel.

Hy maak die slaapsaal se deur oop en is skaars binne toe hy skielik so 'n geweldige pyn voel dat dit vir hom voel asof iemand sy kop oopsny. Hy weet nie waar hy is, of hy staan of lê nie, hy kan nie eens sy eie naam onthou nie.

'n Maniese gelag weergalm in sy ore . . . hy is gelukkiger as wat hy nog ooit was . . . jubelend, ekstaties, triomfantlik . . . 'n wonderlike, wonderlike ding het so pas gebeur . . .

"Harry? HARRY!"

Iemand klap sy gesig. Die maniese gelag word onderbreek deur 'n uitroep van pyn. Die geluk vloei uit hom, maar die gelag duur voort.

Harry maak sy oë oop en besef dat die wilde gelag uit sy eie mond kom. Dit sterf onmiddellik weg. Hy lê hygend op die vloer en staar na die plafon. Die litteken op sy voorkop klop verblindend.

Ron buk oor hom en lyk baie bekommerd. "Wat het gebeur?"

"Ek . . . weet nie . . ." snak Harry en kom orent. "Hy is baie gelukkig . . . regtig gelukkig . . ."

"Is dit Jy-Weet-Wie?"

"Iets baie goeds het gebeur," mompel Harry. Hy bewee net so erg soos toe die slang vir meneer Weasley aangeval het en voel baie naar. "Iets wat hy baie graag wou hê, het gebeur."

Net soos die dag in die Griffindor-kleedkamer is dit asof 'n

vreemdeling deur Harry se mond praat. En tog weet hy dat dit alles waar is. Hy trek sy asem diep in om te keer dat hy oor Ron opgooi. Tot sy verligting is Dean en Septimus nie in die kamer nie.

“Hermien het gesê ek moet kom kyk hoe dit met jou gaan,” sê Ron en help Harry orent. “Sy’t gesê jou weerstand sal laag wees nadat Snerp met jou brein gepeuter het. . . . Nou ja, dit sal darem ook op die ou end help?”

Hy kyk onseker na Harry terwyl hy hom in die bed help. Harry knik sonder dat hy dit glo. Toe hy op sy kussings neersak, pyn sy hele lyf van al die kere wat hy daardie aand geval het. Sy litteken prik nog steeds pynlik. En hy kan nie help om benoud te wonder of die eerste Okklumensie-les nie sy weerstand eerder afgebreek as versterk het nie. Hy wonder ook ontsteld hoekom die heer Voldemort vir die eerste keer in veertien jaar dolgelukkig is.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



THE BEETLE AT BAY

Harry's question was answered the very next morning. When Hermione's *Daily Prophet* arrived she smoothed it out, gazed for a moment at the front page, and then gave a yelp that caused everyone in the vicinity to stare at her.

"What?" said Harry and Ron together.

For an answer she spread the newspaper on the table in front of them and pointed at ten black-and-white photographs that filled the whole of the front page, nine showing wizards' faces and the tenth, a witch's. Some of the people in the photographs were silently jeering; others were tapping their fingers on the frame of their pictures,

looking insolent. Each picture was captioned with a name and the crime for which the person had been sent to Azkaban.

Antonin Dolohov, read the legend beneath a wizard with a long, pale, twisted face who was sneering up at Harry, *convicted of the brutal murders of Gideon and Fabian Prewett.*

Augustus Rookwood, said the caption beneath a pockmarked man with greasy hair who was leaning against the edge of his picture, looking bored, *convicted of leaking Ministry of Magic Secrets to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.*

But Harry's eyes were drawn to the picture of the witch. Her face had leapt out at him the moment he had seen the page. She had long, dark hair that looked unkempt and straggly in the picture, though he had seen it sleek, thick, and shining. She glared up at him through heavily lidded eyes, an arrogant, disdainful smile playing around her thin mouth. Like Sirius, she retained vestiges of great good looks, but something — perhaps Azkaban — had taken most of her beauty.

Bellatrix Lestrange, *convicted of the torture and permanent incapacitation of Frank and Alice Longbottom.*

Hermione nudged Harry and pointed at the headline over the pictures, which Harry, concentrating on Bellatrix, had not yet read.

MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN MINISTRY FEARS BLACK IS "RALLYING POINT" FOR OLD DEATH EATERS

"Black?" said Harry loudly. "Not — ?"

"*Shhh!*" whispered Hermione desperately. "Not so loud — just read it!"

The Ministry of Magic announced late last night that there has been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

Speaking to reporters in his private office, Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, confirmed that ten high-security prisoners escaped in the early hours of yesterday evening, and that he has already informed the Muggle Prime Minister of the dangerous nature of these individuals.

“We find ourselves, most unfortunately, in the same position we were two and a half years ago when the murderer Sirius Black escaped,” said Fudge last night. “Nor do we think the two breakouts are unrelated. An escape of this magnitude suggests outside help, and we must remember that Black, as the first person ever to break out of Azkaban, would be ideally placed to help others follow in his footsteps. We think it likely that these individuals, who include Black’s cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange, have rallied around Black as their leader. We are, however, doing all we can to round up the criminals and beg the magical community to remain alert and cautious. On no account should any of these individuals be approached.”

“There you are, Harry,” said Ron, looking awestruck. “That’s why he was happy last night . . .”

“I don’t believe this,” snarled Harry, “Fudge is blaming the breakout on *Sirius*?”

“What other options does he have?” said Hermione bitterly. “He can hardly say, ‘Sorry everyone, Dumbledore warned me this might happen, the Azkaban guards have joined Lord Voldemort’ — stop

whimpering, Ron — ‘and now Voldemort’s worst supporters have broken out too.’ I mean, he’s spent a good six months telling everyone you and Dumbledore are liars, hasn’t he?”

Hermione ripped open the newspaper and began to read the report inside while Harry looked around the Great Hall. He could not understand why his fellow students were not looking scared or at least discussing the terrible piece of news on the front page, but very few of them took the newspaper every day like Hermione. There they all were, talking about homework and Quidditch and who knew what other rubbish, and outside these walls ten more Death Eaters had swollen Voldemort’s ranks. . . .

He glanced up at the staff table. It was a different story here: Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall were deep in conversation, both looking extremely grave. Professor Sprout had the *Prophet* propped against a bottle of ketchup and was reading the front page with such concentration that she was not noticing the gentle drip of egg yolk falling into her lap from her stationary spoon. Meanwhile, at the far end of the table, Professor Umbridge was tucking into a bowl of porridge. For once her pouchy toad’s eyes were not sweeping the Great Hall looking for misbehaving students. She scowled as she gulped down her food and every now and then she shot a malevolent glance up the table to where Dumbledore and McGonagall were talking so intently.

“Oh my —” said Hermione wonderingly, still staring at the newspaper.

“What now?” said Harry quickly; he was feeling jumpy.

“It’s . . . *horrible*,” said Hermione, looking shaken. She folded

back page ten of the newspaper and handed it back to Harry and Ron.

TRAGIC DEMISE OF MINISTRY OF MAGIC WORKER

St. Mungo's Hospital promised a full inquiry last night after Ministry of Magic worker Broderick Bode, 49, was discovered dead in his bed, strangled by a potted-plant. Healers called to the scene were unable to revive Mr. Bode, who had been injured in a workplace accident some weeks prior to his death.

Healer Miriam Strout, who was in charge of Mr. Bode's ward at the time of the incident, has been suspended on full pay and was unavailable for comment yesterday, but a spokeswizard for the hospital said in a statement, "St. Mungo's deeply regrets the death of Mr. Bode, whose health was improving steadily prior to this tragic accident.

"We have strict guidelines on the decorations permitted on our wards but it appears that Healer Strout, busy over the Christmas period, overlooked the dangers of the plant on Mr. Bode's bedside table. As his speech and mobility improved, Healer Strout encouraged Mr. Bode to look after the plant himself, unaware that it was not an innocent Flitterbloom, but a cutting of Devil's Snare, which, when touched by the convalescent Mr. Bode, throttled him instantly.

"St. Mungo's is as yet unable to account for the presence of the plant on the ward and asks any witch or wizard with information to come forward."

"Bode . . ." said Ron. "*Bode*. It rings a bell . . ."

"We saw him," Hermione whispered. "In St. Mungo's, remember?"

He was in the bed opposite Lockhart's, just lying there, staring at the ceiling. And we saw the Devil's Snare arrive. She — the Healer — said it was a Christmas present . . .”

Harry looked back at the story. A feeling of horror was rising like bile in his throat.

“How come we didn't recognize Devil's Snare . . . ? We've seen it before . . . we could've stopped this from happening . . .”

“Who expects Devil's Snare to turn up in a hospital disguised as a potted plant?” said Ron sharply. “It's not our fault, whoever sent it to the bloke is to blame! They must be a real prat, why didn't they check what they were buying?”

“Oh come on, Ron!” said Hermione shakily, “I don't think anyone could put Devil's Snare in a pot and not realize it tries to kill whoever touches it? This — this was murder. . . . A clever murder, as well. . . . If the plant was sent anonymously, how's anyone ever going to find out who did it?”

Harry was not thinking about Devil's Snare. He was remembering taking the lift down to the ninth level of the Ministry on the day of his hearing, and the sallow-faced man who had got in on the Atrium level.

“I met Bode,” he said slowly. “I saw him at the Ministry with your dad . . .”

Ron's mouth fell open.

“I've heard Dad talk about him at home! He was an Unspeakable — he worked in the Department of Mysteries!”

They looked at one another for a moment, then Hermione pulled the newspaper back toward her, closed it, glared for a moment at the

pictures of the ten escaped Death Eaters on the front, then leapt to her feet.

“Where are you going?” said Ron, startled.

“To send a letter,” said Hermione, swinging her bag onto her shoulder. “It . . . well, I don’t know whether . . . but it’s worth trying . . . and I’m the only one who can . . .”

“I *hate* it when she does that,” grumbled Ron as he and Harry got up from the table and made their own, slower way out of the Great Hall. “Would it kill her to tell us what she’s up to for once? It’d take her about ten more seconds — hey, Hagrid!”

Hagrid was standing beside the doors into the entrance hall, waiting for a crowd of Ravenclaws to pass. He was still as heavily bruised as he had been on the day he had come back from his mission to the giants and there was a new cut right across the bridge of his nose.

“All righ’, you two?” he said, trying to muster a smile but managing only a kind of pained grimace.

“Are you okay, Hagrid?” asked Harry, following him as he lumbered after the Ravenclaws.

“Fine, fine,” said Hagrid with a feeble assumption of airiness; he waved a hand and narrowly missed concussing a frightened-looking Professor Vector, who was passing. “Jus’ busy, yeh know, usual stuff — lessons ter prepare — couple o’ salamanders got scale rot — an’ I’m on probation,” he mumbled.

“*You’re on probation?*” said Ron very loudly, so that many students passing looked around curiously. “Sorry — I mean — you’re on probation?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid. “’S’no more’n I expected, ter tell yeh the truth. Yeh migh’ not’ve picked up on it, bu’ that inspection didn’ go too well, yeh know . . . anyway,” he sighed deeply. “Bes’ go an rub a bit more chili powder on them salamanders or their tails’ll be hangin’ off ’em next. See yeh, Harry . . . Ron . . .”

He trudged away, out the front doors and down the stone steps into the damp grounds. Harry watched him go, wondering how much more bad news he could stand.

The fact that Hagrid was now on probation became common knowledge within the school over the next few days, but to Harry’s indignation, hardly anybody appeared to be upset about it; indeed, some people, Draco Malfoy prominent among them, seemed positively gleeful. As for the freakish death of an obscure Department of Mysteries employee in St. Mungo’s, Harry, Ron, and Hermione seemed to be the only people who knew or cared. There was only one topic of conversation in the corridors now: the ten escaped Death Eaters, whose story had finally filtered through the school from those few people who read the newspapers. Rumors were flying that some of the convicts had been spotted in Hogsmeade, that they were supposed to be hiding out in the Shrieking Shack and that they were going to break into Hogwarts, just as Sirius Black had done.

Those who came from Wizarding families had grown up hearing the names of these Death Eaters spoken with almost as much fear as Voldemort’s; the crimes they had committed during the days of Voldemort’s reign of terror were legendary. There were relatives of their victims among the Hogwarts students, who now found

themselves the unwilling objects of a gruesome sort of reflected fame as they walked the corridors. Susan Bones, who had an uncle, aunt, and cousins who had all died at the hands of one of the ten, said miserably during Herbology that she now had a good idea what it felt like to be Harry.

“And I don’t know how you stand it, it’s horrible,” she said bluntly, dumping far too much dragon manure on her tray of Screechsnap seedlings, causing them to wriggle and squeak in discomfort.

It was true that Harry was the subject of much renewed muttering and pointing in the corridors these days, yet he thought he detected a slight difference in the tone of the whisperers’ voices. They sounded curious rather than hostile now, and once or twice he was sure he overheard snatches of conversation that suggested that the speakers were not satisfied with the *Prophet*’s version of how and why ten Death Eaters had managed to break out of Azkaban fortress. In their confusion and fear, these doubters now seemed to be turning to the only other explanation available to them, the one that Harry and Dumbledore had been expounding since the previous year.

It was not only the students’ mood that had changed. It was now quite common to come across two or three teachers conversing in low, urgent whispers in the corridors, breaking off their conversations the moment they saw students approaching.

“They obviously can’t talk freely in the staffroom anymore,” said Hermione in a low voice, as she, Harry, and Ron passed Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout huddled together outside the Charms classroom one day. “Not with Umbridge there.”

“Reckon they know anything new?” said Ron, gazing back over his shoulder at the three teachers.

“If they do, we’re not going to hear about it, are we?” said Harry angrily. “Not after Decree . . . What number are we on now?”

For new signs had appeared on the house notice boards the morning after news of the Azkaban breakout:

===== BY ORDER OF =====

The High Inquisitor of Hogwarts

Teachers are hereby banned from giving students any information that is not strictly related to the subjects they are paid to teach.

*The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number
Twenty-six.*

Signed:

Dolores Jane Umbridge

HIGH INQUISITOR



This latest decree had been the subject of a great number of jokes among the students. Lee Jordan had pointed out to Umbridge that by the terms of the new rule she was not allowed to tell Fred and George off for playing Exploding Snap in the back of the class.

“Exploding Snap’s got nothing to do with Defense Against the Dark Arts, Professor! That’s not information relating to your

subject!"

When Harry next saw Lee, the back of his hand was bleeding rather badly. Harry recommended essence of murtlap.

Harry had thought that the breakout from Azkaban might have humbled Umbridge a little, that she might have been abashed at the catastrophe that had occurred right under her beloved Fudge's nose. It seemed, however, to have only intensified her furious desire to bring every aspect of life at Hogwarts under her personal control. She seemed determined at the very least to achieve a sacking before long, and the only question was whether it would be Professor Trelawney or Hagrid who went first.

Every single Divination and Care of Magical Creatures lesson was now conducted in the presence of Umbridge and her clipboard. She lurked by the fire in the heavily perfumed tower room, interrupting Professor Trelawney's increasingly hysterical talks with difficult questions about Ornithomancy and Heptomology, insisting that she predict students' answers before they gave them and demanding that she demonstrate her skill at the crystal ball, the tea leaves, and the rune stones in turn. Harry thought that Professor Trelawney might soon crack under the strain; several times he passed her in the corridors (in itself a very unusual occurrence as she generally remained in her tower room), muttering wildly to herself, wringing her hands, and shooting terrified glances over her shoulder, all the time giving off a powerful smell of cooking sherry. If he had not been so worried about Hagrid, he would have felt sorry for her — but if one of them was to be ousted out of a job, there could be only one choice for Harry as to who should remain.

Unfortunately, Harry could not see that Hagrid was putting up a better show than Trelawney. Though he seemed to be following Hermione's advice and had shown them nothing more frightening than a crup, a creature indistinguishable from a Jack Russell terrier except for its forked tail, since before Christmas, he also seemed to have lost his nerve. He was oddly distracted and jumpy in lessons, losing the thread of what he was saying while talking to the class, answering questions wrongly and glancing anxiously at Umbridge all the time. He was also more distant with Harry, Ron, and Hermione than he had ever been before, expressly forbidding them to visit him after dark.

"If she catches yeh, it'll be all of our necks on the line," he told them flatly, and with no desire to do anything that jeopardized his job further, they abstained from walking down to his hut in the evenings.

It seemed to Harry that Umbridge was steadily depriving him of everything that made his life at Hogwarts worth living: visits to Hagrid's house, letters from Sirius, his Firebolt, and Quidditch. He took his revenge the only way he had: redoubling his efforts for the D.A.

Harry was pleased to see that all of them, even Zacharias Smith, had been spurred to work harder than ever by the news that ten more Death Eaters were now on the loose, but in nobody was this improvement more pronounced than in Neville. The news of his parents' attacker's escape had wrought a strange and even slightly alarming change in him. He had not once mentioned his meeting with Harry, Ron, and Hermione on the closed ward in St. Mungo's, and taking their lead from him, they had kept quiet about it too. Nor had he said anything on the subject of Bellatrix and her fellow torturers.

escape; in fact, he barely spoke during D.A. meetings anymore, but worked relentlessly on every new jinx and countercurse Harry taught them, his plump face screwed up in concentration, apparently indifferent to injuries or accidents, working harder than anyone else in the room. He was improving so fast it was quite unnerving and when Harry taught them the Shield Charm, a means of deflecting minor jinxes so that they rebounded upon the attacker, only Hermione mastered the charm faster than Neville.

In fact Harry would have given a great deal to be making as much progress at Occlumency as Neville was making during D.A. meetings. Harry's sessions with Snape, which had started badly enough, were not improving; on the contrary, Harry felt he was getting worse with every lesson.

Before he had started studying Occlumency, his scar had prickled occasionally, usually during the night, or else following one of those strange flashes of Voldemort's thoughts or moods that he experienced every now and then. Nowadays, however, his scar hardly ever stopped prickling, and he often felt lurches of annoyance or cheerfulness that were unrelated to what was happening to him at the time, which were always accompanied by a particularly painful twinge from his scar. He had the horrible impression that he was slowly turning into a kind of aerial that was tuned in to tiny fluctuations in Voldemort's mood, and he was sure he could date this increased sensitivity firmly from his first Occlumency lesson with Snape. What was more, he was now dreaming about walking down the corridor toward the entrance to the Department of Mysteries almost every night, dreams that always culminated in him standing

longingly in front of the plain black door.

"Maybe it's a bit like an illness," said Hermione, looking concerned when Harry confided in her and Ron. "A fever or something. It has to get worse before it gets better."

"It's lessons with Snape that are making it worse," said Harry flatly. "I'm getting sick of my scar hurting, and I'm getting bored walking down that corridor every night." He rubbed his forehead angrily. "I just wish the door would open, I'm sick of standing staring at it —"

"That's not funny," said Hermione sharply. "Dumbledore doesn't want you to have dreams about that corridor at all, or he wouldn't have asked Snape to teach you Occlumency. You're just going to have to work a bit harder in your lessons."

"I am working!" said Harry, nettled. "You try it sometime, Snape trying to get inside your head, it's not a bundle of laughs, you know!"

"Maybe . . ." said Ron slowly.

"Maybe what?" said Hermione rather snappishly.

"Maybe it's not Harry's fault he can't close his mind," said Ron darkly.

"What do you mean?" said Hermione.

"Well, maybe Snape isn't really trying to help Harry . . ."

Harry and Hermione stared at him. Ron looked darkly and meaningfully from one to the other.

"Maybe," he said again in a lower voice, "he's actually trying to open Harry's mind a bit wider . . . make it easier for You-Know —"

"Shut up, Ron," said Hermione angrily. "How many times have you suspected Snape, and when have you *ever* been right?"

Dumbledore trusts him, he works for the Order, that ought to be enough.”

“He used to be a Death Eater,” said Ron stubbornly. “And we’ve never seen proof that he *really* swapped sides . . .”

“Dumbledore trusts him,” Hermione repeated. “And if we can’t trust Dumbledore, we can’t trust anyone.”

With so much to worry about and so much to do — startling amounts of homework that frequently kept the fifth years working until past midnight, secret D.A. meetings, and regular classes with Snape — January seemed to be passing alarmingly fast. Before Harry knew it, February had arrived, bringing with it wetter and warmer weather and the prospect of the second Hogsmeade visit of the year. Harry had had very little time to spare on conversations with Cho since they had agreed to visit the village together, but suddenly found himself facing a Valentine’s Day spent entirely in her company.

On the morning of the fourteenth he dressed particularly carefully. He and Ron arrived at breakfast just in time for the arrival of the post owls. Hedwig was not there — not that he had expected her — but Hermione was tugging a letter from the beak of an unfamiliar brown owl as they sat down.

“And about time! If it hadn’t come today . . .” she said eagerly, tearing open the envelope and pulling out a small piece of parchment. Her eyes sped from left to right as she read through the message and a grimly pleased expression spread across her face.

“Listen, Harry,” she said, looking up at him. “This is really important. . . . Do you think you could meet me in the Three

Broomsticks around midday?"

"Well . . . I dunno," said Harry dubiously. "Cho might be expecting me to spend the whole day with her. We never said what we were going to do."

"Well, bring her along if you must," said Hermione urgently. "But will you come?"

"Well . . . all right, but why?"

"I haven't got time to tell you now, I've got to answer this quickly —"

And she hurried out of the Great Hall, the letter clutched in one hand and a piece of uneaten toast in the other.

"Are you coming?" Harry asked Ron, but he shook his head, looking glum.

"I can't come into Hogsmeade at all, Angelina wants a full day's training. Like it's going to help — we're the worst team I've ever seen. You should see Sloper and Kirke, they're pathetic, even worse than I am." He heaved a great sigh. "I dunno why Angelina won't just let me resign . . ."

"It's because you're good when you're on form, that's why," said Harry irritably.

He found it very hard to be sympathetic to Ron's plight when he himself would have given almost anything to be playing in the forthcoming match against Hufflepuff. Ron seemed to notice Harry's tone, because he did not mention Quidditch again during breakfast, and there was a slight frostiness in the way they said good-bye to each other shortly afterward. Ron departed for the Quidditch pitch and Harry, after attempting to flatten his hair while staring at his

reflection in the back of a teaspoon, proceeded alone to the entrance hall to meet Cho, feeling very apprehensive and wondering what on earth they were going to talk about.

She was waiting for him a little to the side of the oak front doors, looking very pretty with her hair tied back in a long ponytail. Harry's feet seemed to be too big for his body as he walked toward her, and he was suddenly horribly aware of his arms and how stupid they looked swinging at his sides.

"Hi," said Cho slightly breathlessly.

"Hi," said Harry.

They stared at each other for a moment, then Harry said, "Well — er — shall we go, then?"

"Oh — yes . . ."

They joined the queue of people being signed out by Filch, occasionally catching each other's eye and grinning shiftily, but not talking to each other. Harry was relieved when they reached the fresh air, finding it easier to walk along in silence than just stand there looking awkward. It was a fresh, breezy sort of day and as they passed the Quidditch stadium, Harry glimpsed Ron and Ginny skimming over the stands and felt a horrible pang that he was not up there with them. . . .

"You really miss it, don't you?" said Cho.

He looked around and saw her watching him.

"Yeah," sighed Harry. "I do."

"Remember the first time we played against each other?" she asked him.

"Yeah," said Harry, grinning. "You kept blocking me."

“And Wood told you not to be a gentleman and knock me off my broom if you had to,” said Cho, smiling reminiscently. “I heard he got taken on by Pride of Portree, is that right?”

“Nah, it was Puddlemere United, I saw him at the World Cup last year.”

“Oh, I saw you there too, remember? We were on the same campsite. It was really good, wasn’t it?”

The subject of the Quidditch World Cup carried them all the way down the drive and out through the gates. Harry could hardly believe how easy it was to talk to her, no more difficult, in fact, than talking to Ron and Hermione, and he was just starting to feel confident and cheerful when a large gang of Slytherin girls passed them, including Pansy Parkinson.

“Potter and Chang!” screeched Pansy to a chorus of snide giggles. “Urgh, Chang, I don’t think much of your taste. . . . At least Diggory was good-looking!”

They sped up, talking and shrieking in a pointed fashion with many exaggerated glances back at Harry and Cho, leaving an embarrassed silence in their wake. Harry could think of nothing else to say about Quidditch, and Cho, slightly flushed, was watching her feet.

“So . . . where d’you want to go?” Harry asked as they entered Hogsmeade. The High Street was full of students ambling up and down, peering into the shop windows and messing about together on the pavements.

“Oh . . . I don’t mind,” said Cho, shrugging. “Um . . . shall we just have a look in the shops or something?”

They wandered toward Dervish and Banges. A large poster had

been stuck up in the window and a few Hogsmeaders were looking at it. They moved aside when Harry and Cho approached and Harry found himself staring once more at the ten pictures of the escaped Death Eaters. The poster ("By Order of the Ministry of Magic") offered a thousand-Galleon reward to any witch or wizard with information relating to the recapture of any of the convicts pictured.

"It's funny, isn't it," said Cho in a low voice, also gazing up at the pictures of the Death Eaters. "Remember when that Sirius Black escaped, and there were dementors all over Hogsmeade looking for him? And now ten Death Eaters are on the loose and there aren't dementors anywhere . . ."

"Yeah," said Harry, tearing his eyes away from Bellatrix Lestrangle's face to glance up and down the High Street. "Yeah, it is weird . . ."

He was not sorry that there were no dementors nearby, but now he came to think of it, their absence was highly significant. They had not only let the Death Eaters escape, they were not bothering to look for them . . . It looked as though they really were outside Ministry control now.

The ten escaped Death Eaters were staring out of every shop window he and Cho passed. It started to rain as they passed Scrivenshaft's; cold, heavy drops of water kept hitting Harry's face and the back of his neck.

"Um . . . d'you want to get a coffee?" said Cho tentatively, as the rain began to fall more heavily.

"Yeah, all right," said Harry, looking around. "Where — ?"

"Oh, there's a really nice place just up here, haven't you ever been

to Madam Puddifoot's?" she said brightly, and she led him up a side road and into a small tea shop that Harry had never noticed before. It was a cramped, steamy little place where everything seemed to have been decorated with frills or bows. Harry was reminded unpleasantly of Umbridge's office.

"Cute, isn't it?" said Cho happily.

"Er . . . yeah," said Harry untruthfully.

"Look, she's decorated it for Valentine's Day!" said Cho, indicating a number of golden cherubs that were hovering over each of the small, circular tables, occasionally throwing pink confetti over the occupants.

"Aaah . . ."

They sat down at the last remaining table, which was situated in the steamy window. Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain, was sitting about a foot and a half away with a pretty blonde girl. They were holding hands. The sight made Harry feel uncomfortable, particularly when, looking around the tea shop, he saw that it was full of nothing but couples, all of them holding hands. Perhaps Cho would expect him to hold *her* hand.

"What can I get you, m'dears?" said Madam Puddifoot, a very stout woman with a shiny black bun, squeezing between their table and Roger Davies's with great difficulty.

"Two coffees, please," said Cho.

In the time it took for their coffees to arrive, Roger Davies and his girlfriend started kissing over their sugar bowl. Harry wished they wouldn't, he felt that Davies was setting a standard with which Cho would soon expect him to compete. He felt his face growing hot and

tried staring out of the window, but it was so steamed up he could not see the street outside. To postpone the moment when he had to look at Cho he stared up at the ceiling as though examining the paintwork and received a handful of confetti in the face from their hovering cherub.

After a few more painful minutes Cho mentioned Umbridge; Harry seized on the subject with relief and they passed a few happy moments abusing her, but the subject had already been so thoroughly canvassed during D.A. meetings it did not last very long. Silence fell again. Harry was very conscious of the slurping noises coming from the table next door and cast wildly around for something else to say.

“Er . . . listen, d’you want to come with me to the Three Broomsticks at lunchtime? I’m meeting Hermione Granger there.”

Cho raised her eyebrows.

“You’re meeting Hermione Granger? Today?”

“Yeah. Well, she asked me to, so I thought I would. D’you want to come with me? She said it wouldn’t matter if you did.”

“Oh . . . well . . . that was nice of her.”

But Cho did not sound as though she thought it was nice at all; on the contrary, her tone was cold and all of a sudden she looked rather forbidding.

A few more minutes passed in total silence, Harry drinking his coffee so fast that he would soon need a fresh cup. Next door, Roger Davies and his girlfriend seemed glued together by the lips.

Cho’s hand was lying on the table beside her coffee, and Harry was feeling a mounting pressure to take hold of it. *Just do it*, he told himself, as a fount of mingled panic and excitement surged up inside his chest. *Just reach out and grab it.* . . . Amazing how much more

difficult it was to extend his arm twelve inches and touch her hand than to snatch a speeding Snitch from midair . . .

But just as he moved his hand forward, Cho took hers off the table. She was now watching Roger Davies kissing his girlfriend with a mildly interested expression.

“He asked me out, you know,” she said in a quiet voice. “A couple of weeks ago. Roger. I turned him down, though.”

Harry, who had grabbed the sugar bowl to excuse his sudden lunging movement across the table, could not think why she was telling him this. If she wished she were sitting at the table next door being heartily kissed by Roger Davies, why had she agreed to come out with him?

He said nothing. Their cherub threw another handful of confetti over them; some of it landed in the last cold dregs of coffee Harry had been about to drink.

“I came in here with Cedric last year,” said Cho.

In the second or so it took for him to take in what she had said, Harry’s insides had become glacial. He could not believe she wanted to talk about Cedric now, while kissing couples surrounded them and a cherub floated over their heads.

Cho’s voice was rather higher when she spoke again.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you for ages. . . . Did Cedric — did he m-m-mention me at all before he died?”

This was the very last subject on earth Harry wanted to discuss, and least of all with Cho.

“Well — no —” he said quietly. “There — there wasn’t time for him to say anything. Erm . . . so . . . d’you . . . d’you get to see a lot of

Quidditch in the holidays? You support the Tornados, right?”

His voice sounded falsely bright and cheery. To his horror, he saw that her eyes were swimming with tears again, just as they had been after the last D.A. meeting before Christmas.

“Look,” he said desperately, leaning in so that nobody else could overhear, “let’s not talk about Cedric right now. . . . Let’s talk about something else . . .”

But this, apparently, was quite the wrong thing to say.

“I thought,” she said, tears spattering down onto the table. “I thought *you’d* u-u-understand! I *need* to talk about it! Surely you n-need to talk about it t-too! I mean, you saw it happen, d-didn’t you?”

Everything was going nightmarishly wrong; Roger Davies’ girlfriend had even unglued herself to look around at Cho crying.

“Well — I have talked about it,” Harry said in a whisper, “to Ron and Hermione, but —”

“Oh, you’ll talk to Hermione Granger!” she said shrilly, her face now shining with tears, and several more kissing couples broke apart to stare. “But you won’t talk to me! P-perhaps it would be best if we just . . . just p-paid and you went and met up with Hermione G-Granger, like you obviously want to!”

Harry stared at her, utterly bewildered, as she seized a frilly napkin and dabbed at her shining face with it.

“Cho?” he said weakly, wishing Roger would seize his girlfriend and start kissing her again to stop her goggling at him and Cho.

“Go on, leave!” she said, now crying into the napkin. “I don’t know why you asked me out in the first place if you’re going to make arrangements to meet other girls right after me. . . . How many are

you meeting after Hermione?"

"It's not like that!" said Harry, and he was so relieved at finally understanding what she was annoyed about that he laughed, which he realized a split second too late was a mistake.

Cho sprang to her feet. The whole tearoom was quiet, and everybody was watching them now.

"I'll see you around, Harry," she said dramatically, and hiccuping slightly she dashed to the door, wrenched it open, and hurried off into the pouring rain.

"Cho!" Harry called after her, but the door had already swung shut behind her with a tuneful tinkle.

There was total silence within the tea shop. Every eye was upon Harry. He threw a Galleon down onto the table, shook pink confetti out of his eyes, and followed Cho out of the door.

It was raining hard now, and she was nowhere to be seen. He simply did not understand what had happened; half an hour ago they had been getting along fine.

"Women!" he muttered angrily, sloshing down the rain-washed street with his hands in his pockets. "What did she want to talk about Cedric for anyway? Why does she always want to drag up a subject that makes her act like a human hosepipe?"

He turned right and broke into a splashy run, and within minutes he was turning into the doorway of the Three Broomsticks. He knew he was too early to meet Hermione, but he thought it likely there would be someone in here with whom he could spend the intervening time. He shook his wet hair out of his eyes and looked around. Hagrid was sitting alone in a corner, looking morose.

“Hi, Hagrid!” he said, when he had squeezed through the crammed tables and pulled up a chair beside him.

Hagrid jumped and looked down at Harry as though he barely recognized him. Harry saw that he had two fresh cuts on his face and several new bruises.

“Oh, it’s you, Harry,” said Hagrid. “You all righ’?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” lied Harry; in fact, next to this battered and mournful-looking Hagrid, he felt he did not have much to complain about. “Er — are you okay?”

“Me?” said Hagrid. “Oh yeah, I’m grand, Harry, grand . . .”

He gazed into the depths of his pewter tankard, which was the size of a large bucket, and sighed. Harry did not know what to say to him. They sat side by side in silence for a moment. Then Hagrid said abruptly, “In the same boat, you an’ me, aren’ we, Harry?”

“Er —” said Harry.

“Yeah . . . I’ve said it before. . . . Both outsiders, like,” said Hagrid, nodding wisely. “An’ both orphans. Yeah . . . both orphans.”

He took a great swig from his tankard.

“Makes a diff’rence, havin’ a decent family,” he said. “Me dad was decent. An’ your mum an’ dad were decent. If they’d lived, life woulda bin diff’rent, eh?”

“Yeah. . . . I s’pose,” said Harry cautiously. Hagrid seemed to be in a very strange mood.

“Family,” said Hagrid gloomily. “Whatever yeh say, blood’s important . . .”

And he wiped a trickle of it out of his eye.

“Hagrid,” said Harry, unable to stop himself, “where are you

getting all these injuries?"

"Eh?" said Hagrid, looking startled. "Wha' injuries?"

"All those!" said Harry, pointing at Hagrid's face.

"Oh . . . tha's jus' normal bumps an' bruises, Harry," said Hagrid dismissively. "I got a rough job."

He drained his tankard, set it back upon the table, and got to his feet.

"I'll be seein' yeh, Harry. . . . Take care now . . ."

And he lumbered out of the pub looking wretched and then disappeared into the torrential rain. Harry watched him go, feeling miserable. Hagrid was unhappy and he was hiding something, but he seemed determined not to accept help. What was going on? But before Harry could think about the matter any further, he heard a voice calling his name.

"Harry! Harry, over here!"

Hermione was waving at him from the other side of the room. He got up and made his way toward her through the crowded pub. He was still a few tables away when he realized that Hermione was not alone; she was sitting at a table with the unlikeliest pair of drinking mates he could ever have imagined: Luna Lovegood and none other than Rita Skeeter, ex-journalist on the *Daily Prophet* and one of Hermione's least favorite people in the world.

"You're early!" said Hermione, moving along to give him room to sit down. "I thought you were with Cho, I wasn't expecting you for another hour at least!"

"Cho?" said Rita at once, twisting around in her seat to stare avidly at Harry. "A *girl*?"

She snatched up her crocodile-skin handbag and groped within it.

“It’s none of *your* business if Harry’s been with a hundred girls,” Hermione told Rita coolly. “So you can put that away right now.”

Rita had been on the point of withdrawing an acid-green quill from her bag. Looking as though she had been forced to swallow Stinksap, she snapped her bag shut again.

“What are you up to?” Harry asked, sitting down and staring from Rita to Luna to Hermione.

“Little Miss Perfect was just about to tell me when you arrived,” said Rita, taking a large slurp of her drink. “I suppose I’m allowed to *talk* to him, am I?” she shot at Hermione.

“Yes, I suppose you are,” said Hermione coldly.

Unemployment did not suit Rita. The hair that had once been set in elaborate curls now hung lank and unkempt around her face. The scarlet paint on her two-inch talons was chipped and there were a couple of false jewels missing from her winged glasses. She took another great gulp of her drink and said out of the corner of her mouth, “Pretty girl, is she, Harry?”

“One more word about Harry’s love life and the deal’s off and that’s a promise,” said Hermione irritably.

“What deal?” said Rita, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. “You haven’t mentioned a deal yet, Miss Prissy, you just told me to turn up. Oh, one of these days . . .” She took a deep shuddering breath.

“Yes, yes, one of these days you’ll write more horrible stories about Harry and me,” said Hermione indifferently. “Find someone who cares, why don’t you?”

“They’ve run plenty of horrible stories about Harry this year without my help,” said Rita, shooting a sideways look at him over the top of her glass and adding in a rough whisper, “How has that made you feel, Harry? Betrayed? Distraught? Misunderstood?”

“He feels angry, of course,” said Hermione in a hard, clear voice. “Because he’s told the Minister of Magic the truth and the Minister’s too much of an idiot to believe him.”

“So you actually stick to it, do you, that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back?” said Rita, lowering her glass and subjecting Harry to a piercing stare while her finger strayed longingly to the clasp of the crocodile bag. “You stand by all this garbage Dumbledore’s been telling everybody about You-Know-Who returning and you being the sole witness — ?”

“I wasn’t the sole witness,” snarled Harry. “There were a dozen-odd Death Eaters there as well. Want their names?”

“I’d love them,” breathed Rita, now fumbling in her bag once more and gazing at him as though he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. “A great bold headline: *‘Potter Accuses . . .’* A subheading: *‘Harry Potter Names Death Eaters Still Among Us.’* And then, beneath a nice big photograph of you: *‘Disturbed teenage survivor of You-Know-Who’s attack, Harry Potter, 15, caused outrage yesterday by accusing respectable and prominent members of the Wizarding community of being Death Eaters . . .’*”

The Quick-Quotes Quill was actually in her hand and halfway to her mouth when the rapturous expression died out of her face.

“But of course,” she said, lowering the quill and looking daggers at Hermione, “Little Miss Perfect wouldn’t want that story out there,

would she?"

"As a matter of fact," said Hermione sweetly, "that's exactly what Little Miss Perfect *does* want."

Rita stared at her. So did Harry. Luna, on the other hand, sang, "Weasley Is Our King" dreamily under her breath and stirred her drink with a cocktail onion on a stick.

"You *want* me to report what he says about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" Rita asked Hermione in a hushed voice.

"Yes, I do," said Hermione. "The true story. All the facts. Exactly as Harry reports them. He'll give you all the details, he'll tell you the names of the undiscovered Death Eaters he saw there, he'll tell you what Voldemort looks like now — oh, get a grip on yourself," she added contemptuously, throwing a napkin across the table, for at the sound of Voldemort's name, Rita had jumped so badly that she had slopped half her glass of firewhisky down herself.

Rita blotted the front of her grubby raincoat, still staring at Hermione. Then she said baldly, "The *Prophet* wouldn't print it. In case you haven't noticed, nobody believes his cock-and-bull story. Everyone thinks he's delusional. Now, if you let me write the story from that angle —"

"We don't need another story about how Harry's lost his marbles!" said Hermione angrily. "We've had plenty of those already, thank you! I want him given the opportunity to tell the truth!"

"There's no market for a story like that," said Rita coldly.

"You mean the *Prophet* won't print it because Fudge won't let them," said Hermione irritably.

Rita gave Hermione a long, hard look. Then, leaning forward,

across the table toward her, she said in a businesslike tone, "All right, Fudge is leaning on the *Prophet*, but it comes to the same thing. They won't print a story that shows Harry in a good light. Nobody wants to read it. It's against the public mood. This last Azkaban breakout has got people quite worried enough. People just don't want to believe You-Know-Who's back."

"So the *Daily Prophet* exists to tell people what they want to hear, does it?" said Hermione scathingly.

Rita sat up straight again, her eyebrows raised, and drained her glass of firewhisky.

"The *Prophet* exists to sell itself, you silly girl," she said coldly.

"My dad thinks it's an awful paper," said Luna, chipping into the conversation unexpectedly. Sucking on her cocktail onion, she gazed at Rita with her enormous, protuberant, slightly mad eyes. "He publishes important stories that he thinks the public needs to know. He doesn't care about making money."

Rita looked disparagingly at Luna.

"I'm guessing your father runs some stupid little village newsletter?" she said. "'Twenty-five Ways to Mingle with Muggles' and the dates of the next Bring-and-Fly Sale?"

"No," said Luna, dipping her onion back into her gillywater, "he's the editor of *The Quibbler*."

Rita snorted so loudly that people at a nearby table looked around in alarm.

"'Important stories he thinks the public needs to know'?" she said witheringly. "I could manure my garden with the contents of that rag."

"Well, this is your chance to raise the tone of it a bit, isn't it?" said

Hermione pleasantly. "Luna says her father's quite happy to take Harry's interview. That's who'll be publishing it."

Rita stared at them both for a moment and then let out a great whoop of laughter.

"*The Quibbler!*!" she said, cackling. "You think people will take him seriously if he's published in *The Quibbler*?"

"Some people won't," said Hermione in a level voice. "But the *Daily Prophet*'s version of the Azkaban breakout had some gaping holes in it. I think a lot of people will be wondering whether there isn't a better explanation of what happened, and if there's an alternative story available, even if it is published in a" — she glanced sideways at Luna, "in a — well, an *unusual* magazine — I think they might be rather keen to read it."

Rita did not say anything for a while, but eyed Hermione shrewdly, her head a little to one side.

"All right, let's say for a moment I'll do it," she said abruptly. "What kind of fee am I going to get?"

"I don't think Daddy exactly pays people to write for the magazine," said Luna dreamily. "They do it because it's an honor, and, of course, to see their names in print."

Rita Skeeter looked as though the taste of Stinksap was strong in her mouth again as she rounded on Hermione. "I'm supposed to do this *for free*?"

"Well, yes," said Hermione calmly, taking a sip of her drink. "Otherwise, as you very well know, I will inform the authorities that you are an unregistered Animagus. Of course, the *Prophet* might give you rather a lot for an insider's account of life in Azkaban. . . ."

Rita looked as though she would have liked nothing better than to seize the paper umbrella sticking out of Hermione's drink and thrust it up her nose.

"I don't suppose I've got any choice, have I?" said Rita, her voice shaking slightly. She opened her crocodile bag once more, withdrew a piece of parchment, and raised her Quick-Quotes Quill.

"Daddy will be pleased," said Luna brightly. A muscle twitched in Rita's jaw.

"Okay, Harry?" said Hermione, turning to him. "Ready to tell the public the truth?"

"I suppose," said Harry, watching Rita balancing the Quick-Quotes Quill at the ready on the parchment between them.

"Fire away, then, Rita," said Hermione serenely, fishing a cherry out of the bottom of her glass.

Die kewe val aan

Harry se vraag word die volgende oggend beantwoord! Toe Hermien se *Daaglikse Profeet* opdaag, stryk sy dit plat, kyk na die voorblad en gee 'n kreet wat almal in die omtrek na haar laat staan.

“Wat?” sê Harry en Ron gelyk.

Sy antwoord nie, maar sprei die koerant op die tafel oop en wys na tien swart-wit foto's op die voorblad. Nege is van towenaars en die tiende is 'n heks. Party van die mense op die foto's lyk spottend, ander trommel met hul vingers teen die rame en lyk astringent. Onderaan elke foto is 'n naam en die misdaad waarvoor die persoon na Azkaban gestuur is.

Antonin Dolohov, sê die onderskrif by die foto van 'n towenaar met 'n smalende, bleek gesig, veroordeel vir die brutale moord op Gideon en Fabian Prewett.

Algernon Rookwood, sê die opskrif onder 'n man met olierige hare en 'n gesig vol pokmerke wat teen die kant van sy foto leun en verveeld lyk, skuldig bevind op aanklag dat hy geheime van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns aan Hy-Wat-Nie-Genoem-Mag-Word-Nie gelek het.

Maar Harry se oë is vasgehael op die heks se foto. Haar gesig het onmiddellik sy aandag getrek. Sy het lang donker hare wat onversorg en toingrig op die foto lyk, maar toe hy haar die eerste keer gesien het, was dit glansend, dik en glad. Sy gluur van onder swaar ooglede na hom en 'n arrogante, minagtende glimlaggie speel om haar dun lippe. Soos by Sirius is daar spore van 'n besonder aantreklike gesig, maar iets – dalk Azkaban – het haar van haar skoonheid beroof.

Bellatrix Lestrange, skuldig bevind aan die marteling en permanente verminking van Frank en Alice Loggerenberg.

Hermien stamp aan Harry en wys na die hoofopskrif wat Harry nog nie gelees het nie omdat hy nog steeds na Bellatrix staan.

GROOTSKAALE ONTSNAPPING UIT AZKABAN
MINISTERIE VREES SWARDT VOORSIEN
ONTMOETINGSPLEK VIR OU DOODSETERS

"Swardt?" sê Harry hard. "Nie –?"

"Sjfff!" sis Hermien benoud. "Nie so hard nie – lees dit met!"

Die Ministerie vir Towerkuns het laat laas nag aangekondig dat daar 'n massaontsnapping uit Azkaban was.

Cornelius Broddelwerk, Minister vir Towerkuns, het in sy privaat kantoor in gesprek met verslaggewers bevestig dat tien hoësielkerheidsgewangeses vroeg gisteraand ontsnap het en dat hy die Moggels se Eerste Minister reeds in kennis gestel het dat hierdie individue uiters gewaarlik is.

"Ons bevind ons ongelukkig in 'n situasie soortgelyk aan twee en 'n half jaar gelede toe die moordenaar Sirius Swardt ontsnap het," het Broddelwerk laas nag gesê. "Ons vermoed dat die twee ontsnappings verwant is. 'n Ontsnapping van hierdie aard kan onmoonlik sonder hulp van buite geskied, en ons moet onthou dat Swardt, die eerste persoon wat nog ooit uit Azkaban ontsnap het, in die ideale posisie is om andere te help om in sy voetspore te volg. Ons reken dat hierdie persoon, wat Swardt se niggie, Bellatrix Lestrange, insluit, hulle om Swardt as hul leier skaar. Ons doen ons uiterste bes om die misdadigers vas te trek en versoek die towergemeenskap om paraat en op hul hoede te wees. Hierdie individue moet onder geen omstandighede gemader word nie."

"Daar het jy dit, Harry," sê Ron geskok. "Dis hoekom hy laas nag so bly was."

"Ek glo dit nie," grom Harry. "Broddelwerk blameer die ontsnappings op Sirius?"

"Watter ander opsies het hy?" sê Hermien bitter. "Hy kan seker nie sê: 'Jammer, ouens, Dompeldorius het my hierteen gewaarsku, die Azkaban-wagte het so pas by die heer Woldemort' – hou op kerm, Ron – aangesluit en nou het Woldemort se grootste ondersteuners ook uitgebreek. Ek bedoel, hy vertel al ses maande lank vir almal dat jy en Dompeldorius leuenaars is!"

Hermien slaan die koerant oop en begin om die berig binne-in te lees terwyl Harry in die Groot Saal rondkyk. Hy kan nie verstaan hoekom die ander studente nie ook bang lyk of minstens die vreeslike nuus op die voorblad bespreek nie, maar daar is min van hulle wat die koerant so gereeld soos Hermien kry. Hulle sit almal

en praat oor huiswerk en Kwiddiek en wie weet watter twak terwyl nog tien Doodseters by Woldemort se geledere aangesluit het.

Hy kyk na die personeeltafel. Daar lyk dinge heeltemal anders. Dompeldorius en professor McGonagall is druk in gesprek en lyk albei besonder ernstig. Professor Spruit het die *Profeet* teen 'n bottel tamatiesous gestut en lees die voorblad met soveel konsentrasie dat sy nie agterkom dat eiergeel van haar lepel op haar skoot drup nie. Aan die oorkant van die tafel sit professor Umbridge aan haar bord pap en smul. Haar pofferige paddaoë is vir 'n verandering nie besig om oor die Groot Saal te speel op soek na studente wat hulle nie gedra nie. Sy eet fronsend en kyk elke nou en dan grimmig na waar Dompeldorius en McGonagall saggies sit en praat.

“O nee –” sê Hermien geskok en staar nog steeds na die koerant.

“Wat nou weer?” vra Harry vinnig; hy voel senuagtig.

“Dis . . . aaklig,” Hermien se stem klink bewurig. Sy vou die koerant terug by bladsy tien en gee dit vir Harry en Ron aan.

TRAGIESE DOOD VAN WERKNEMER VAN MINISTERIE VIR TOWERKUNS

Sint Mungo het laas nag onderneem om 'n volledige ondersoek te gelas na die dood van Broderick Bodus, 49, werknemer van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns, wat deur 'n potplant verwurg is. Helers wat na die toneel ontbied is, kon meneer Bodus nie bybring nie. Hy is 'n paar weke voor sy dood in 'n ongeluk by sy werkplek beseer.

Heler Miriam Strout, wat ten tye van die voorval op diens in meneer Bodus se slaapsaal was, se dienste is opgeskort met volle betaling. Sy was nie gister beskikbaar vir kommentaar nie, maar 'n woordvoerder van die hospitaal het die volgende verklaring uitgereik:

“Sint Mungo is diep bedroef deur die dood van meneer Bodus, wie se gesondheid voor die tragiese ongeluk al aansienlik verbeter het.

“Ons het streng riglyne wat toelaatbare versierings in ons sale betref, maar dit wil voorkom asof heler Strout tydens die druk Kersgety nie besef het hoe gevaarlik die plant op meneer Bodus se bedkassie is nie. Soos meneer Bodus se spraak en beweeglikheid verbeter het, het heler Strout hom aangemoedig om die plant self te versorg. Sy was onbewus daarvan dat dit geen onskuldige fladderblom was nie, maar 'n duiwelsklousteggie wat meneer Bodus dadelik verwurg het toe hy daaraan raak.

“Sint Mungo kan nog geen verklaring bied vir die teenwoordigheid van die plant in die saal nie en vra enige heks of towenaar met inligting om na vore te kom.”

"Bodus . . ." sê Ron. "Bodus. Iewers lui 'n klokke . . ."

"Ons het hom gesien," fluister Hermien. "In Sint Mungo. Onthou julle nie? Hy was in die bed oorkant Lockhart. Hy't net daar gelê en na die plafon gestaar. En ons het gesien toe die duiwelsklou opdaag. Hy – die heler – het gesê dis 'n Kersgeskenk."

Harry kyk weer na die berig. 'n Nare gevoel stoot soos gal in sy keel op.

"Hoekom het ons nie die duiwelsklou herken nie? Ons het dit al vantevore gesien . . . ons kon dit verhoed het."

"Wie verwag duiwelsklou opgedollie soos 'n potplant in 'n hospitaal?" sê Ron skril. "Dis nie ons skuld nie. Dis die mense wat dit gestuur het se skuld. Hulle moet regte ape wees. Kon hulle nie kyk wat hulle koop nie?"

"Komaan, Ron!" sê Hermien bewurig. "Ek dink nie iemand kan duiwelsklou in 'n pot sit sonder om te weet dit gaan wie ook al daaraan raak probeer verwurg nie. Dit was moord, 'n baie slim moord daarby. En as die plant anoniem gestuur is, hoe gaan iemand ooit uitvind wie dit was?"

Harry dink nie aan die duiwelsklou nie. Hy dink aan die dag van sy verhoor toe hulle die hysbak af na die Ministerie se negende verdieping geneem het, en aan die man met die bleek gesig wat by die Atrium ingeklim het.

"Ek het vir Bodus ontmoet," sê hy stadig. "Ek het hom by die Ministerie gesien toe ek saam met jou pa daar was."

Ron se mond val oop.

"Nou onthou ek. Pa het by die huis van hom gepraat! Hy was 'n Onbeskryflike – hy't by die Departement vir Geheime gewerk!"

Hulle staar 'n rukkie na mekaar. Dan trek Hermien die koerant nader, maak dit toe, gluur 'n oomblik na die foto's van die tien ontsnapte Doodseters op die voorblad en spring op.

"Waarheen gaan jy?" vra Ron verskrik.

"'n Brief stuur," sê Hermien en swaai haar sak oor haar skouer. "Dis . . . wel, ek weet nie of . . . maar dis die moeite werd om te probeer . . . en ek is al een wat kan."

"Ek haat dit as sy dit doen," brom Ron toe hy en Harry ook opstaan en stadiger uit die Groot Saal stap. "Is dit só moeilik om vir ons te sê wat sy wil doen? Dit sou skaars tien sekondes vat – haai, Hagrid!"

Hagrid staan by die deure na die ingangsportaal en wag dat 'n groep Raweklouers verbystap. Hy is nog net so vol blou kolle soos die dag toe hy van sy sending na die reuse teruggekom het en daar is 'n vars sny oor die brug van sy neus.

"Is julle twee okei?" sê hy, en probeer glimlag, maar dit lyk meer soos 'n gepynigde grynsag.

"Is jy oukei, Hagrid?" vra Harry en stap saam met hom agter die Raweklouers aan.

"Ja, ja." Dis duidelik dat Hagrid probeer om lighartig te klink. Hy waai met sy hand en mis net-net om vir professor Vektor harsingskudding te gee toe hy verbystap. "Net besig, weet julle, gewone soort goed . . . lesse om voor te berei . . . paar salamanders met skubvrot . . . En ek is op proef," brom hy.

"Jy's op proef?" sê Ron só hard dat 'n paar studente wat verbystap nuuskierig omkyk. "Jammer – ek bedoel – jy's op proef?" fluister hy.

"Ja," sê Hagrid. "Ek het niks beters verwag nie, om nou eerlik te wees. Julle het dit seker nie agtergekom nie, maar daardie inspeksie het nie goed afgeloop nie. In elk geval," hy sug swaar, "ek moet nog rissiepoeier aan daardie salamanders gaan smeer voor hulle sterfte afval. Sien julle, Harry . . . Ron . . ."

Hy slof weg, uit by die voordeur en af met die kliptrappe na die nat terrein. Harry se oë volg hom terwyl hy wonder hoeveel slegte nuus nog op hom wag.

Die feit dat Hagrid op proef is, is gou algemene kennis in die skool, maar tot Harry se verontwaardiging is niemand juis omgekrap nie. Inteendeel, party mense soos Draco Malfoy is duidelik hoog in hulle skik. Wat die fratsdood van 'n obskure werknemer van die Ministerie in Sint Mungo betref, lyk dit of Harry, Ron en Hermien die enigste mense is wat omgee of selfs daarvan weet.

Daar word nou net oor een onderwerp in die gange gepraat: die tien ontsnapte Doodseters wie se verhaal deur die enkele mense wat die koerant gelees het deur die skool versprei is. Riemtelegramme is volop: die vlugteling is in Hogsmeade gesien; hulle skuil in die Kermende Krot en gaan nes Sirius Swardt by Hogwarts inbreek.

Die studente uit towenaarsfamilies het in huise grootgeword waar hierdie Doodseters se name amper net soveel vrees as Woldemort s'n ontlok het. Die misdade wat hulle tydens Woldemort se bewind gepleeg het, is legendaries. Familielide van hul slagoffers is nou, teen hul sin, op 'n soort grusame manier beroemd. Susan Bones, wie se oom, tante, neefs en niggies almal deur een van die tien vermoor is, sê mismoedig tydens 'n Herbologie-klas dat sy nou weet hoe Harry voel.

"Ek weet nie hoe jy dit hou nie – dis aaklig," sê sy kortaf. Sy strooi per ongeluk te veel draakmis oor haar plantkissie met skreebekkie-saailinge, sodat hulle van ongemak kriewel en kerm.

Daar word deesdae opnuut in die gange na Harry gewys en oor hom gepraat, maar hy kan aanvoel dat dit hierdie keer anders is. Die studente klink nuuskierig eerder as vyandig en hy hoor 'n paar goed wat hom laat besef dat nie almal die *Profeet* se weergawe van hoe en hoekom die Doodseters uit die Azkaban-fort ontsnap het, bloot aanvaar nie. Dit lyk of die mense so verward en bang is dat hulle nou bereid is om die enigste werkbare verklaring te aanvaar: die een wat Harry en Dompeldorius reeds sedert die vorige jaar verkondig.

Dis nie net die studente wie se gemoedstemming verander het nie. Daar is gereeld twee of drie onderwysers wat saggies maar dringend in die gange staan en praat en onmiddellik stilbly as hulle studente sien aankom.

"Hulle kan seker nie meer vryelik in die personeelkamer praat nie," sê Hermien gedemp toe sy, Harry en Ron op 'n dag verby professors McGonagall, Flickerpitt en Spruit stap waar hulle voor die lowerspreuk-klaskamer staan en gesels. "Nie met Umbridge in die rondte nie."

"Dink jy hulle het iets nuuts gehoor?" Ron kyk oor sy skouer na die drie onderwysers.

"As dit die geval is, sal hulle nie vir ons sê nie," sê Harry vererg. "Nie na Dekreet nommer wat nou weer nie?" Nuwe kennisgewings het ná die ontsnapping uit Azkaban op die kennisgewingsborde verskyn:

*OP LAS VAN DIE HOË ONDERSOEKER VAN HOGWARTS
Onderwysers word hiermee verbied om enige inligting aan studente
oor te dra wat nie streng verband hou met die vakke wat hulle
betaal word om aan te bied nie.*

*Bostaande is in ooreenstemming met Opvoedkundige Dekreet
Nommer Ses-en-twintig.*

Geteken: Dolores Jane Umbridge, Hoë Ondersoeker.

Die jongste Dekreet word die teiken van 'n groot klomp studentegrappe. Lee Jordaan wys Umbridge daarop dat sy in terme van hierdie nuwe reël nie met Fred en George mag raas wanneer hulle ontplofkaart agterin die klas speel nie.

"Ontplofkaart het niks met Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste uit te waai nie, Professor! Dis nie inligting wat met hierdie vak verband hou nie!"

Toe Harry daarna weer vir Lee sien, het sy hand kwaai gebloei en Harry het murklapekstrak aanbeveel.

Harry het verwag dat die ontsnapping uit Azkaban vir Umbridge

'n bietjie van haar troontjie sou lig, dat sy haar sou skaam vir die katastrofe wat onder haar geliefde Broddelwerk se neus plaasgevind het. Dit lyk egter of dit net haar koorsige begeerte om alle aspekte van Hogwarts onder haar persoonlike beheer te kry, versterk het. Sy is duidelik vas van plan om binnekort iemand te ontslaan en die enigste vraag is wie haar eerste slagoffer gaan wees: professor Trelawney of Hagrid.

Elke enkele les wat verband hou met Versorging van Magiese Kreature of Waarsêery geskied nou in die teenwoordigheid van Umbridge en haar aanknipbord. Sy skuil by die vuur in die swaar geparfumeerde toringkamer, val professor Trelawney, wat al historieser word, in die rede met moeilike vrae oor ornitomansie en heptomologie, dring daarop aan dat Trelawney studente se antwoorde voorspel, en eis dat sy wys hoe vaardig sy met die kristalbal, teeblare en runeklippe is.

Harry verwag dat professor Trelawney binnekort onder die druk gaan knak. Hy sien haar 'n paar keer in die gange – wat reeds ongewoon is, aangesien sy meestal in haar toringkamer bly – waar sy wild met haarself praat, haar hande wring en verskrik oor haar skouer loer terwyl sy sterk na kooksjerrie ruik. As hy nie so bekommerd oor Hagrid was nie, sou hy vir haar jammer gevoel het, maar as een van hulle hul werk moet verloor, is daar wat Harry betref net een keuse.

Dis ongelukkig baie duidelik dat Hagrid nie juis beter as Trelawney vaar nie. Hoewel hy Hermien se raad volg en sedert Kersfees vir hulle nog niks gevaarliker as 'n kroep gewys het nie – 'n dier wat behalwe sy gevurkte stert nes 'n Jack Russell lyk – is hy duidelik op sy senuwees. Hy is vreemd ingedagte en gespanne tydens klasse, verloor sy draad, beantwoord vrae verkeerd en loer die hele tyd angstig na Umbridge. Hy was nog nooit so kortaf met Harry, Ron en Hermien nie en verbied hulle volstrek om hom ná donker te besoek.

“As sy julle vang, rol ons almal se koppe,” sê hy pront. En omdat hulle niks wil doen wat sy werk verder in gevaar sal stel nie, gaan hulle nie meer saans na sy hut nie.

Dit voel vir Harry asof Umbridge besig is om alles van hom weg te neem wat sy lewe by Hogwarts die moeite werd gemaak het: besoeke aan Hagrid se hut, briewe van Sirius, sy Vuurslag en Kwiddiek. Daar is net een manier waarop hy kan terugveg: deur sy uiterste bes met die DS te doen.

Hy is in sy skik toe hy sien die nuus dat nog tien Doodseters op vrye voet is almal aanspoor om nog harder te werk, selfs vir Sagrys Smit. Maar niemand het so dramaties verbeter as Neville nie. Die

tyding dat sy ouers se aanvallers ontsnap het, het 'n vreemde, amper onstellige verandering in hom bewerkstellig. Hy het nog nie een keer oor sy ontmoeting met Harry, Ron en Hermien in die geslote saal by Sint Mungo gepraat nie. Hulle volg sy voorbeeld en bly ook stil. Hy sê ook niks oor Bellatrix en haar medefolterars se ontsnapping nie. Om die waarheid te sê, Neville praat skaars tydens die DS-byeenkomste, maar hy werk onvermoeid aan elke nuwe paljas en teenvloek wat Harry hulle leer. Sy mollige gesig is vertrek van konsentrasie en dis of beserings en ongelukke hom glad nie skeel nie, maar hom eerder harder as enigiemand anders in die vertrek laat werk. Hy verbeter verstommend vinnig en toe Harry die klas die Skildspreuk leer – 'n manier om kleiner vloeke af te weer sodat hulle na die aanvaller terugbons – kry net Hermien dit gouer as Neville reg.

Harry sou wat wou gee om ook so vinnig met Okklumensie te vorder as Neville met Verdediging. Sy sessies met Snerp, wat sleg genoeg begin het, raak niks beter nie. Inteendeel, Harry voel dat hy met elke les net vrotter raak.

Voor hy met Okklumensie begin het, het sy litteken nou en dan getintel, gewoonlik snags of ná een van daardie vreemde flitse wanneer hy Woldemort se gedagtes of bui deel. Maar deesdae tintel sy litteken feitlik gedurig en hy ervaar dikwels gevoelens soos ergernis of vrolikheid wat nie verband hou met sy omstandighede nie. Sulke kere trek sy litteken ook besonder pynlik saam. Hy het die aaklige gevoel dat hy besig is om 'n soort lugdraad te word wat die geringste wisseling in Woldemort se luim opvang, en hy is daarvan oortuig dat hierdie groter sensitiwiteit ná sy eerste Okklumensie-klas by Snerp begin het. Wat meer is, hy droom nou amper elke nag dat hy in die gang na die Departement vir Geheime stap, drome wat altyd eindig waar hy verlangend voor die swart deur staan.

“Dalk is dit 'n soort siekte,” sê Hermien bekommerd toe Harry vir haar en Ron vertel wat aangaan. “'n Koors of iets wat erger moet word voor dit kan verbeter.”

“Snerp se klasse maak dit erger,” sê Harry bot. “Ek is moeg van 'n seer litteken en ek is nie meer lus om elke aand in daardie gang af te stap nie.” Hy vryf sy litteken ergerlik. “Ek wens die deur wil oopgaan. Ek wil nie meer daarna staan en kyk nie –”

“Dis nie snaaks nie!” sê Hermien skerp. “Dompeldorius wil nie hê jy moet oor daardie gang droom nie, anders sou hy nie vir Snerp gevra het om vir jou Okklumensie te leer nie. Jy moet harder daaraan werk!”

“Ek werk hard!” sê Harry verontwaardig. “Probeer jy dit 'n slaggie – laat Snerp in jou kop probeer kom – dis nie 'n grap nie, oukei!”

“Dalk . . .” sê Ron stadig

"Dalk wat?" sê Hermien vinnig.

"Dalk is dit nie Harry se skuld dat hy nie sy verstand kan sluit nie," sê Ron onheilspellend.

"Wat bedoel jy?" vra Hermien.

"Wel, dalk probeer Snerp nie regtig om vir Harry te help nie."

Harry en Hermien staar na hom. Ron kyk somber en betekenisvol van die een na die ander.

"Dalk," sê hy weer in 'n sagter stem, "probeer hy eintlik om Harry se brein wyer oop te maak sodat dit makliker is vir Jy-Weet."

"Hou jou snater, Ron," sê Hermien kwaai. "Hoeveel keer het jy al vir Snerp verdink, en was jy al ooit reg? Dompeldorius vertrou hom, hy werk vir die Orde, dis tog genoeg."

"Hy was 'n Doodseter," sê Ron koppig. "En ons het nog geen bewyse gesien dat hy regtig omgeswaai het nie."

"Dompeldorius vertrou hom," herhaal Hermien. "En as ons nie vir Dompeldorius kan vertrou nie, kan ons niemand vertrou nie."

Met soveel bekommernisse en soveel om te doen – skrikwekkende hoeveelhede huiswerk wat die vyfdejaars dikwels tot ná middernag besig hou, geheime DS-byeenkomste en gereelde klasse by Snerp – gaan Januarie in 'n oogwink verby. Voor Harry dit weet, is dit Februarie, met natter en warmer weer en die vooruitsig van die tweede Hogsmeade-besoek vir die jaar. Hy het nog nie tyd gehad om met Cho te gesels sedert hulle besluit het om saam op die Hogsmeade-uitstappie te gaan nie, maar skielik is dit Valentynsdag en 'n hele dag in haar geselskap lê voor.

Die oggend van die veertiende seek hy sy klere met sorg uit. Toe hy en Ron afgaan vir ontbyt, daag die posuile ook op. Hedwig is nie daar nie – nie dat Harry haar verwag het nie – maar Hermien is besig om 'n brief uit 'n vreemde bruin uil se snawel te trek toe hulle gaan sit.

"Omtrent tyd! As dit nie vandag gekom het nie..." Sy skeur die koevert gretig oop en haal 'n stukkie perkament uit. Soos sy die boodskap lees, sprei 'n uitdrukking van grimmige tevredenheid oor haar gesig.

"Hoor hier, Harry." Sy kyk op na hom. "Kan jy my teen middagete in die Drie Besemstokke kry? Dis regtig belangrik."

"Hm... ek weet nie," sê Harry onseker. "Cho sal seker wil hê ek moet die hele dag saam met haar deurbring. Ons het nog nie besluit wat ons gaan doen nie."

"Nou maar bring haar saam as jy dan moet," sê Hermien dringend. "Maar sal jy kom?"

"Wel . . . oukei, maar hoekom?"

"Ek kan nie nou vir jou sê nie, ek moet dit gou gaan beantwoord!"

Sy hardloop uit die Groot Saal, die brief in een hand en 'n stuk roosterbrood in die ander.

"Kom jy?" vra Harry vir Ron, wat sy kop skud en suur lyk.

"Ek kan nie Hogsmeade toe gaan nie. Angelina wil hê ons moet die hele dag oefen. Asof dit gaan help. Ons is die vrotste span wat ek nog ooit gesien het. Jy moet vir Sloper en Kriek sien, hulle is pateties, nog vrotter as ek." Hy sug swaar. "Ek weet nie hoekom Angelina my nie net laat loop nie."

"Dis omdat jy goed is as jy op dreef is, dis hoekom," sê Harry ernstig.

Dis vir hom baie moeilik om vir Ron jammer te wees terwyl hy enigiets sal gee om in die komende wedstryd teen Hoesenproes te speel. Ron moet iets gemerk het, want hy praat nie weer tydens ontbyt oor Kwiddiek nie, en toe hulle kort daarna tot siens sê, is hulle effens koel met mekaar. Ron stap na die Kwiddiekveld en nadat Harry sy hare agterop 'n teelepel se weerkaatsing probeer platdruk het, sit hy af na die ingangsportaal om vir Cho te ontmoet, baie bekommerd oor waaroor hulle die hele dag gaan gesels.

Sy staan eenkant by die eikehoutdeure en wag en lyk baie mooi, haar hare vasgebind in 'n lang poniestert. Terwyl Harry na haar stap, voel sy voete te groot vir sy lyf en hy is skielik vreeslik bewus van sy arms en hoe simpel hulle moet lyk waar hulle langs sy sye swaai.

"Hallo," sê Cho effens uitasem.

"Haai," sê Harry.

Hulle kyk 'n rukkie na mekaar voor. Harry sê: "Wel – hm – sal ons gaan?"

"O – ja . . ."

Hulle sluit aan by die ry mense wat by Fillis uitteken, vang nou en dan mekaar se oë en glimlag effens, maar praat nie met mekaar nie. Harry is verlig toe hulle buite kom. Dis makliker om te loop sonder om iets te sê as om net daar te staan en simpel lyk. Dis 'n fris, winderige dag en toe hulle verby die Kwiddiekveld stap, sien Harry vir Ron en Ginny oor die pawiljoen vlieg. Dit voel aaklig om nie daar te wees nie.

"Jy mis dit, nê?" sê Cho.

Hy kyk om en sien dat sy hom dophou.

"Ja," sug Harry. "Baie."

"Onthou jy die eerste keer toe ons teen mekaar gespeel het? In ons derde jaar?"

"Ja." Harry grinnik. "Jy't my aanmekaar geblok."

“En toe’t Wood vir jou gesê om nie ’n heer te wees nie en my van my besem af te stamp as jy moet.” Cho glimlag by die herinnering. “Ek hoor hy speel nou vir Pride of Portree; is dit reg?”

“Nee, dis Puddlemere United. Ek het hom verlede jaar in die Wêreldbeker sien speel.”

“O, ek was ook daar, onthou jy? Ons was op dieselfde kampeerterrein. Dit was lekker, nê?”

Hulle praat oor die Kwiddiekwêreldbeker al die pad af tot hulle deur Hogwarts se hekke is. Harry kan nie glo dat dit so maklik is om met haar te praat nie – niks moeiliker as met Ron of Hermien nie – en hy begin net op sy gemak voel toe ’n groot groep Slibberinmeisies verby hulle stap. Pansy Parkinson is ook by.

“Potter en Chang!” skree Pansy terwyl die ander meisies giggel. “Jig, Chang, jou smaak . . . Diggory het minstens na iets gelyk!”

Die meisies stap pratend en gillend verby terwyl hulle met groot gebaar omkyk na Harry en Cho, wat verleë stilgeword het. Harry kan nie aan iets dink om oor Kwiddiek te sê nie en Cho, wat ’n bietjie rooi is, staar na haar voete.

“So . . . waarheen gaan ons?” vra Harry toe hulle by Hogsmeade kom. Hoogstraat is vol studente wat heen en weer slenter, na winkelvesters kyk en op die sypaadjes rondskarrel.

“O . . . ek weet nie,” sê Cho. “Hm . . . sal ons na die winkels gaan kyk of iets?”

Hulle stap na Derwisj & Boems. ’n Groot plakkaat is teen die venster opgeplak en ’n paar inwoners van Hogsmeade staan daarna en kyk. Hulle gee pad toe Harry en Cho nader kom en Harry staar nogmaals na die tien ontsnapte Doodseters se gesigte. Die plakkaat is op las van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns en bied ’n beloning van ’n duisend Galjoene aan enige heks of towenaar met inligting wat tot die inhegtenisneming van die misdadigers sal lei.

“Dis snaaks, nê?” sê Cho sag terwyl sy na die Doodseters se foto’s staar. “Onthou jy toe Sirius Swardt ontsnap het? Toe was Hogsmeade vol Dementors wat na hom gesoek het. En nou het tien Doodseters ontsnap en hier’s geen Dementors nie . . .”

“Ja,” sê Harry. Hy skeur sy oë weg van Bellatrix Lestrangle se gesig en kyk op en af in Hoogstraat. “Ja, dis snaaks.”

Hy is nie spyt dat daar nie Dementors in die omgewing is nie, maar hoe meer hy daaroor dink, hoe meer betekenisvol raak hul afwesigheid. Hulle het nie net die Doodseters laat ontsnap nie, hulle soek nie eens na hulle nie . . . dit lyk regtig of hulle nou buite die Ministerie se beheer is.

Die tien ontsnapte Doodseters staar uit elke winkelveenster waar

hy en Cho verbystap. Toe hulle by die Griffel & Veerpen kom, begin dit reën – koue, harde druppels wat Harry in die gesig en agter teen sy nek slaan.

“Hm . . . sal ons gaan koffie drink?” vra Cho huiwerig toe dit al harder reën.

“Ja, kom,” sê Harry en kyk rond. “Waar?”

“Daar’s ’n baie oulike plekkie nie ver hiervandaan nie. Was jy al by Die Polfyntjie?” sê sy gretig en neem hom na ’n koffiewinkeltjie in ’n systraat wat Harry nog nooit tevore raak gesien het nie. Dis beknop en toegewasem en dit lyk of alles met valletjies en strikke versier is. Dit herinner Harry onplesierig baie aan Umbridge se kantoor.

“Oulik, nê?” sê Cho in haar skik.

“Hm . . . ja,” lieg Harry.

“Kyk, sy’t dit vir Valentynsdag versier!” Cho wys na ’n klomp goue engeltjies wat bo die ronde tafeltjies hang en elke nou en dan pienk konfetti oor die mense strooi.

“Ek sien . . .”

Hulle gaan sit by die laaste leë tafel voor die toegewasemde venster naby Roger Davies, Raweklou se Kwiddiekkaptein, en ’n mooi blonde meisie. Hulle hou hande vas. Harry voel ongemaklik toe hy dit sien, veral toe hy verder in die koffiewinkel rondkyk en sien dat dit vol paartjies is wat ook hande vashou. Sou Cho verwag dat hy haar hand moet vashou?

“Wat kan ek vir julle kry, liefies?” vra Madame Polfyn, ’n gesette vrou met ’n blinkswart bolla wat met groot moeite verby Roger Davies-hulle se tafel skuur.

“Twee koffies, asseblief,” sê Cho.

Terwyl hulle vir die koffie wag, soen Roger Davies en sy meisie mekaar bo-oor die suikerpot. Harry wens hulle wil ophou. Hy het ’n nare gevoel dat Davies besig is om ’n voorbeeld te stel wat Cho dalk sal voel hy moet volg. Hy voel hoe sy gesig rooi en warm word en wil deur die venster kyk, maar dit is so vol wasem dat hy nie die straat kan sien nie. In sy poging om die oomblik uit te stel dat hy na Cho moet kyk, kyk hy op na die plafon asof hy die verfwerk bewonder en ’n swewende engeltjie gooi ’n hand vol konfetti in sy gesig.

Nā nog ’n paar pynlike minute sê Cho iets oor Umbridge. Hulle skinder vir ’n paar heerlike oomblikke oor haar, maar sy is al so deeglik tydens die DS-byeenkomste bespreek dat daar min oorgebly het om te sê. Hulle word weer stil. Harry is baie bewus van die slurpge-luide by die tafel langsaan en tas wild rond na iets om oor te gesels.

“Hm . . . hoor hier, wil jy etenstyd saam met my na die Drie Besemstokke gaan? Ek moet vir Hermien la Grange daar kry.”

Cho lig haar wenkbroue.

“Vir Hermien la Grange? Vandag?”

“Ja. Sy’t my gevra en ek moet seker gaan. Kom saam. Sy’t gesê dit maak nie saak nie.”

“O . . . wel . . . dis gaaf van haar.”

Maar Cho klink nie of sy dink dis gaaf nie. Inteendeel, haar stem is koud en skielik lyk sy nogal . . . somber.

Nog ’n paar minute gaan in doodse stilte verby. Harry drink sy koffie so vinnig dat hy binnekort nog ’n koppie sal moet bestel. Dit lyk of Roger Davies en sy meisie aan mekaar se lippe vasgeplak is.

Cho se hand lê op die tafel langs haar koppie. Harry voel al hoe meer hy moet dit vashou. *Doen dit net, sê hy vir homself terwyl hy tegelyk benoud en opgewonde voel, steek net jou hand uit en vat dit.* Dis ongelooflik hoeveel moeiliker dit is om jou arm so ’n entjie uit te steek en haar hand te vat as om ’n blitsige Snip uit die lug te vang.

Hy steek sy hand uit net toe Cho hare van die tafel afhaal. Sy kyk nou met ’n redelike mate van belangstelling hoe Roger Davies sy meisie soen.

“Hy’t my gevra om met hom uit te gaan, weet jy,” sê sy stil. “’n Paar weke gelede. Maar ek het nee gesê.”

Harry, wat die suikerpot gevat het pleks van Cho se hand, wonder hoekom sy dit vir hom sê. As sy eerder langsaan vir Roger Davies wil sit en soen, hoekom het sy ingestem om saam met *hom* uit te gaan?

Hy sê niks. Hul engeltjie gooi nog ’n hand vol konfetti oor hulle. ’n Paar stukkies val in die laaste bietjie koue koffie wat Harry wou drink.

“Ek was verlede jaar saam met Cedric hier,” sê Cho.

Harry se binnegoed word yskoud. Hy kan nie glo dat sy hier tussen al die soenende paartjies en met Valentynsengeltjies bo hul koppe oor Cedric wil praat nie.

Cho se stem is hoër as gewoonlik toe sy weer praat.

“Ek wou al lankal vir jou vra . . . het Cedric – het hy iets oor – oor my gesê voor hy dood is?”

Dis die laaste ding op aarde waaroor Harry wil praat, en veral nie met Cho nie.

“Wel – nee – ” sê hy stil. “Daar – daar was nie tyd vir hom om iets te sê nie. Hm . . . het jy . . . het jy enige Kwiddiekwedstryde tydens die vakansie gesien? Jy skree mos vir die Tornado’s, nè?”

Sy stem klink vals helder en vrolik. Tot sy skok begin Cho se oë weer in trane swem net soos voor Kersfees met hul laaste DS-byeenkoms.

“Luister,” sê hy radeloos en leun nader sodat niemand anders hom kan hoor nie, “ons kan nie nou oor Cedric praat nie. Kom ons praat eerder oor iets anders.”

Maar hy het blykbaar heeltemal die verkeerde ding gesê.

“Ek het gedink,” sê sy en haar trane spat op die tafel, “ek het gedink jy sal v-v-verstaan! Ek moet daarvoor praat! M-moet jy nie ook nie? Ek bedoel, jy’t gesien h-hoe dit gebeur het!”

Harry voel hoe alles soos ’n nagmerrie verkeerd loop. Roger Davies se meisie wikkell haar los en kyk om na die huilende Cho.

“Wel – ek het daarvoor gepraat,” fluister Harry, “met Ron en Hermien, maar –”

“So jy sal met Hermien la Grange praat!” sê Cho skril, haar gesig blink van die trane. Nog paartjies hou op soen en kyk na hulle. “Maar jy wil nie met my praat nie! D – dalk sal dit beter wees as ons net – net b-betaal – dan kan jy na Hermien la G-Grange g-gaan, dis mos wat jy wil doen!”

Harry kyk verwilderd na haar terwyl sy ’n valletjieservet optel en teen haar blink gesig druk.

“Cho?” sê hy swakkies en wens Roger wil sy meisie aanhou soen sodat sy kan ophou om na hulle te staar.

“Toe, loop!” huil sy in die servet. “Ek weet nie hoekom jy my gevra het om met jou uit te gaan as jy planne het om ander meisies ook te sien nie. . . . Hoeveel is daar nog ná Hermien?”

“Dis nie wat jy dink nie!” Harry begin lag uit pure verligting omdat hy uiteindelik besef hoekom sy kwaad is. Hy besef baie goue dat dit ook ’n fout was.

Cho spring op. Die hele koffiewinkel word stil en almal kyk na hulle.

“Sien jou weer, Harry,” sê sy dramaties. Sy hik effens, storm na die deur, pluk dit oop en hardloop uit in die gietende reën.

“Cho!” roep Harry agterna, maar die deur het reeds met ’n melodieuze getinkel agter haar toegeswaai.

Die koffiewinkel is doodstil. Almal kyk na Harry. Hy plak ’n Galjoen op die tafel neer, skud die pienk konfetti uit sy hare en volg vir Cho by die deur uit.

Dit reën nou baie hard en sy is nêrens te siene nie. Hy kan nie verstaan wat verkeerd geloop het nie. ’n Blote halfuur gelede was alles nog heeltemal oukei.

“Vroumense!” prewel hy vies en slof in die nat straat af met sy hande in sy sakke gedruk. “Vir wat wil sy in elk geval oor Cedric praat? Hoekom moet sy altyd ’n onderwerp aanroer wat haar soos ’n menslike tuinslang laat optree?”

Hy draai regs en plas in die straat af. Binne 'n paar minute staan hy voor die Drie Besemstokke se deur. Hy weet dis te vroeg vir Hermien, maar daar sal wel iemand wees met wie hy intussen kan gesels. Binne skud hy sy nat hare uit sy oë en kyk rond. Hagrid sit eenkant in 'n hoek. Hy lyk terneergedruk.

"Hallo, Hagrid!" Harry skuur verby die propvol tafels en trek vir hom 'n stoel uit.

Hagrid wip en staar na Harry asof hy hom skaars herken. Harry sien twee nuwe snye en etlike nuwe kneusplekke op sy gesig.

"O, dis jy, Harry. Is jy oukei?"

"Ja," lieg Harry. In vergelyking met die vernielde en mistroostige Hagrid kan hy seker nie kla nie. "Hm – is jy oukei?"

"Ek?" sê Hagrid. "Ja, ja, dit gaan uitstekend; Harry, heeltemal uitstekend."

Hy staar af in sy piouterwynbeker wat so groot soos 'n emmer is en sug. Harry weet nie wat om vir hom te sê nie. Hulle sit 'n rukkie doodstil by mekaar. Dan sê Hagrid skielik: "In dieselfde bootjie, ek en jy, hè, Harry?"

"Hm –" sê Harry.

"Ja . . . ek het dit al tevore gesê . . . albei soort van buitelanders." Hagrid knik filosofies. "En albei weeskinders. Ja . . . weeskinders, ons twee."

Hy neem 'n groot sluk uit sy wynbeker.

"Maak 'n verskil as jy 'n ordentlike familie het," sê hy. "My pa was ordentlik. En jou ma en pa was. As hulle gelewe het, sou jou lewe baie anders gewees het."

"Ja . . . seker," sê Harry versigtig. Hagrid is in 'n baie vreemde bui.

"Ja, familie," sê Hagrid swaar. "Maak nie saak wat almal sê nie, bloed tel . . ."

Hy vee 'n druppel bloed uit sy oë.

Harry kan homself nie langer keer nie. "Hagrid," vra hy, "waar kom jy aan al hierdie beserings?"

"Hm?" Hagrid lyk verskrik. "Watter beserings?"

"Al daai!" sê Harry en wys na Hagrid se gesig.

"O . . . dis maar die gewone stampe en stote, Harry," sê hy ontwykend. "Ek het 'n rowwe jop."

Hy maak sy drinkbeker leeg, sit dit op die tafel neer en staan op.

"Sien jou, Harry . . . mooi loop."

Hy slof bedruk uit die kroeg en verdwyn in die gietende reën. Harry kyk hom agterna. Hy voel miserabel. Hagrid is diep ongelukkig en daar is iets wat hy wegsteek, maar hy's ook vasbeslote

om nie hulp te aanvaar nie. Wat gaan aan? Voor Harry verder hieroor kan wonder, roep iemand sy naam.

"Harry! Harry, hier oorkant!"

Hermien waai vir hom van die oorkant van die vertrek. Hy staan op en stap deur die stampvol kroeg. Toe hy 'n paar tafeltjies van haar af is, besef hy sy is nie alleen nie. Sy deel 'n tafel met die mees onwaarskynlike geselskap wat jy jou kan voorstel: Mania Goedhief en Rika Skinner, voormalige joernalis by die *Daaglikse Profeet*, en een van die mense van wie Hermien die heel minste hou.

"Jy's vroeg!" sê Hermien en skuif op sodat hy kan sit. "Ek dag jy's by Cho. Ek het jou eers oor 'n uur hier verwag."

"Cho?" sê Rika dadelik. Sy swaai om en staar gretig na Harry. "'n Meisie?"

Sy raap haar krokodilvelhandsak op en begin daarin grawe.

"Dit het niks met jou uit te waai as Harry 'n honderd meisies het nie," sê Hermien kil. "Jy kan dit maar dadelik wegsit."

Rika was op die punt om 'n kopergroen veerpen uit haar sak te haal. Sy lyk of sy Stinksap ingekry het toe sy haar sak toeklap.

Harry staar van Rika na Mania na Hermien. "Wat gaan aan?"

"Juffrou Perfek was op die punt om my te vertel toe jy opdaag," sê Rika en neem 'n groot sluk van haar drankie. "Ek mag seker met hom praat, hê?" sê sy snedig vir Hermien.

"Ja, jy mag seker," sê Hermien koud.

Werkloosheid akkordeer nie met Rika nie. Haar hare, wat eens op 'n tyd deftig gekrul was, hang nou onversorg en steil om haar gesig. Die rooi politoer op haar lang vingernaels is afgedop en 'n paar vals edelstene het uit haar bril se vlerke geval. Sy neem nog 'n groot sluk en sê uit die hoek van haar mond: "Is sy 'n mooi meisie, Harry?"

"Nog een woord oor Harry se liefdeslewe en die transaksie is af – en dis 'n belofte," sê Hermien geïrriteerd.

"Watter transaksie?" Rika vee haar mond met die agterkant van haar hand af. "Jy't nog niks van 'n transaksie gesê nie, juffrou Vroom, jy't net gesê ek moet hier wees. O, een van hierdie dae..." Sy trek haar asem sidderend in.

"Ja, ja, eendag gaan jy nog 'n paar vieslike stories oor my en Harry skryf," sê Hermien ongeërg. "Asof ek omgee."

"Hulle het vanjaar wonderlike vieslike stories oor Harry geskryf sonder my hulp." Rika kyk sydelings na hom oor haar glas voor sy in 'n growwe fluisterstem byvoeg: "Hoe het dit jou laat voel, Harry? Verraai? Ontsteld? Dat niemand jou verstaan nie?"

"Natuurlik was hy kwaad," sê Hermien hard en duidelik. "Want hy't die waarheid vir die Minister vir Towerkuns vertel en die

Minister is te veel van 'n sot om hom te glo."

"Dan hou jy daarby – dat Hy Wat Nie Genoem Moet Word Nie terug is?" vra Rika. Sy laat sak haar glas en kyk priemend na Harry terwyl haar vingers verlangend oor haar handsak se gespe speel. "Jy staan by al daardie twak wat Dompeldorius oor Jy-Weet-Wie se terugkoms vertel het en waarvan jy glo die enigste getuie is?"

"Ek was nie die enigste getuie nie," sê Harry. "Daar was ook meer as 'n dosyn Doodseters. Wil jy hulle name hê?"

"Alte graag!" Rika vroetel verwoed in haar sak en staar na hom asof hy die mooiste ding is wat sy nog ooit gesien het. "n Enorme hoofopskrif: *'Potter beweer...'* n Subopskrif: *'Harry Potter onthul die name van Doodseters in ons midde'*. En onder 'n mooi groot foto van jou, *'Harry Potter, 15, versteurde tiener en enigste oorlewende van 'n aanval deur Jy-Weet-Wie, het gister 'n opskudding veroorsaak toe hy gerespekteerde en vooraanstaande lede van die towenaarsgemeenskap beskuldig het dat hulle Doodseters is'*."

Haar snelskrifveerpen is reeds in haar hand toe die uitdrukking van vreugde op haar gesig wegsterf.

"Maar natuurlik," sy laat sak die veerpen en staar vol venyn na Hermien, "juffrou Perfek sal dit nie goedkeur nie."

"Inteendeel," sê Hermien soet. "Dis presies wat juffrou Perfek wil hê."

Rika staar na haar. En so ook Harry. Mania neurie dromerig "Weasley is ons Koning" en roer haar drankie met 'n snoepstokkie wat in 'n piekeluitjie gedruk is.

"Jy wil hê ek moet skryf wat Harry sê oor Jy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie?" vra Rika in 'n onderdrukte stem.

"Ja, ek wil," sê Hermien. "Die ware verhaal. Al die feite. Presies soos Harry dit vir jou vertel. Hy sal al die besonderhede vir jou gee. Hy sal al die Doodseters wat hy daar gesien het se name noem en vir jou presies vertel hoe Woldemort nou lyk – ag, kom by," sê sy minagtend toe Rika met die noem van Woldemort se naam so hoog wip dat sy die helfte van haar Vuurwhisky oor haarself mors.

Rika vee die voorkant van haar verweerde reënjas af terwyl sy nog steeds na Hermien staar. Dan sê sy pront: "Die Profeet sal dit nie plaas nie. Ingeval jy dit nie agtergekom het nie, niemand glo sy wolhaarstories nie. Almal dink hy's in 'n dwaal. As jy my net sal toelaat om die storie uit daardie hoek te skryf –"

"Ons het nie nog 'n storie nodig oor hoe mal Harry is nie!" sê Hermien vererg. "Daar was al genoeg daarvan, dankie! Ek wil hê hy moet die geleentheid kry om die waarheid te vertel!"

"Daar's nie 'n mark vir so 'n storie nie," sê Rika kil.

“Jy bedoel seker die *Profeet* sal weier om dit te plaas omdat Broddelwerk dit nie sal goedkeur nie?” sê Hermien geïrriteerd.

Rika kyk lank na Hermien. Dan leun sy oor die tafel en sê saaklik: “Toegee, Broddelwerk plaas druk op die *Profeet*, maar dit kom op dieselfde neer. Hulle sal nie ’n storie publiseer wat Harry in ’n goeie lig stel nie omdat niemand dit wil lees nie. Dis nie wat mense wil hoor nie. Hierdie onlangse ontsnappings uit Azkaban het die mense al bang genoeg gemaak. Hulle wil nie glo dat Jy-Weet-Wie terug is nie.”

“Dus bestaan die *Daaglikse Profeet* om mense te vertel wat hulle graag wil hoor?” sê Hermien katterig.

Rika sit regop, lig haar wenkbroue en ledig haar glas Vuurwhisky.

“Die *Profeet* bestaan om homself te verkoop, onnosel,” sê sy kil.

“My pa sê dis ’n patetiese koerant,” sê Mania onverwags tussenin. Sy suig aan die piekeluitjie en staar met haar effens mallerige groot uitpeuloë na Rika. “Hy publiseer belangrike stories wat hy reken mense moet weet. Dit gaan nie vir hom net oor geldmaak nie.”

Rika kyk neerbuigend na Mania. “Jou pa bedryf seker die een of ander dorpskoerantjie. Publiseer goed soos *Vyf-en-twintig maniere om met Moggels te meng* en die datums vir die volgende Bring-en-Vlieg-Verkoping.”

“Nee.” Mania dompel die uitjie weer in haar Viletwater. “Hy’s die redakteur van *Die Vitter*.”

Rika snork so hard dat die mense by die tafel langsaan verbaas omkyk.

“Belangrike stories wat hy reken mense moet weet, hè?” sê sy minagtend. “Ek kan my tuin bemes met die drek wat in daardie oling verskyn.”

“Wel, hier’s jou kans om dit te verbeter,” sê Hermien opgewek. “Mania sê haar pa sal Harry se onderhoud plaas. Hy sal dit publiseer.”

Rika staar ’n oomblik na hulle voor sy luidkeels begin lag.

“*Die Vitter!*” kerkel sy. “Dink jy mense sal hom ernstig opneem as sy onderhoud in *Die Vitter* verskyn?”

“Daar is mense wat nie sal nie,” sê Hermien kalm. “Maar die *Daaglikse Profeet* se weergawe van die ontsnappings uit Azkaban is volgate. Ek dink ’n hele klomp mense wonder of daar nie ’n beter verduideliking is nie. En as daar ’n ander weergawe is, selfs al verskyn dit in ’n –” sy loer onderlangs na Mania, “– wel – *ongewone* tydskrif, (dink ek hulle sal gretig wees om dit te lees.”

Rika sê eers niks, maar kyk stip na Hermien, haar kop effens skeef gedraai.

“Goed, kom ons sê argumentshalwe ek sal dit doen,” sê sy skielik. “Hoe lyk my betaling?”

“Ek dink nie Pappie betaal mense om vir die tydskrif te skryf nie,” sê Mania vaag. “Hulle doen dit omdat dit ’n eer is en natuurlik om hul name in druk te sien.”

Rika Skinner lyk weer of haar mond sterk na Stinksap smaak toe sy na Hermien kyk.

“Ek moet dit verniet doen?”

“Wel, ja,” sê Hermien bedaard. Sy neem ’n sluk van haar drankie. “Tensy jy wil hê dat ek die owerhede laat weet dat jy ’n ongeregistreerde Animagus is. Aan die ander kant, die *Profeet* sal jou seker heelwat betaal vir jou weergawe van die lewe in Azkaban.”

Rika lyk of sy dit baie sal geniet om die papiersambreeltjie in Hermien se glas in haar neusgat op te druk.

“Ek het seker nie ’n keuse nie, het ek?” Rika se stem bewe effens. Sy maak haar krokodilvelhandsak weer oop, haal ’n stuk perkament uit en lig haar snelskrifveerpen.

“Pappie sal baie in sy skik wees,” sê Mania goedkeurend. ’n Spier-tjie spring in Rika se wang.

“Reg, Harry?” Hermien kyk na hom. “Is jy gereed om vir die publiek te vertel wat gebeur het?”

“Ek dink so,” sê Harry toe Rika die snelskrifveerpen op die perkament tussen hulle neersit.

“Laat waai, Rika,” sê Hermien sedig terwyl sy ’n kersie onder uit haar glas vis.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



SEEN AND UNFORESEEN

Luna said vaguely that she did not know how soon Rita's interview with Harry would appear in *The Quibbler*; that her father was expecting a lovely long article on recent sightings of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. "And, of course, that'll be a very important story, so Harry's might have to wait for the following issue," said Luna.

Harry had not found it an easy experience to talk about the night when Voldemort had returned. Rita had pressed him for every little detail, and he had given her everything he could remember, knowing that this was his one big opportunity to tell the world the truth. He

wondered how people would react to the story. He guessed that it would confirm a lot of people in the view that he was completely insane, not least because his story would be appearing alongside utter rubbish about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. But the breakout of Bellatrix Lestrange and her fellow Death Eaters had given Harry a burning desire to do something, whether it worked or not. . . .

“Can’t wait to see what Umbridge thinks of you going public,” said Dean, sounding awestruck at dinner on Monday night. Seamus was shoveling down large amounts of chicken-and-ham pie on Dean’s other side, but Harry knew he was listening.

“It’s the right thing to do, Harry,” said Neville, who was sitting opposite him. He was rather pale, but went on in a low voice, “It must have been . . . tough . . . talking about it. . . . Was it?”

“Yeah,” mumbled Harry, “but people have got to know what Voldemort’s capable of, haven’t they?”

“That’s right,” said Neville, nodding, “and his Death Eaters too . . . People should know . . .”

Neville left his sentence hanging and returned to his baked potato. Seamus looked up, but when he caught Harry’s eye he looked quickly back at his plate again. After a while Dean, Seamus, and Neville departed for the common room, leaving Harry and Hermione at the table waiting for Ron, who had not yet had dinner because of Quidditch practice.

Cho Chang walked into the hall with her friend Marietta. Harry’s stomach gave an unpleasant lurch, but she did not look over at the Gryffindor table and sat down with her back to him.

“Oh, I forgot to ask you,” said Hermione brightly, glancing over at

the Ravenclaw table, “what happened on your date with Cho? How come you were back so early?”

“Er . . . well, it was . . .” said Harry, pulling a dish of rhubarb crumble toward him and helping himself to seconds, “a complete fiasco, now you mention it.”

And he told her what had happened in Madam Puddifoot’s Tea Shop.

“ . . . so then,” he finished several minutes later, as the final bit of crumble disappeared, “she jumps up, right, and says ‘I’ll see you around, Harry,’ and runs out of the place!” He put down his spoon and looked at Hermione. “I mean, what was all that about? What was going on?”

Hermione glanced over at the back of Cho’s head and sighed. “Oh, Harry,” she said sadly. “Well, I’m sorry, but you were a bit tactless.”

“*Me*, tactless?” said Harry, outraged. “One minute we were getting on fine, next minute she was telling me that Roger Davies asked her out, and how she used to go and snog Cedric in that stupid tea shop — how was I supposed to feel about that?”

“Well, you see,” said Hermione, with the patient air of one explaining that one plus one equals two to an overemotional toddler, “you shouldn’t have told her that you wanted to meet me halfway through your date.”

“But, but,” spluttered Harry, “but — you told me to meet you at twelve and to bring her along, how was I supposed to do that without telling her — ?”

“You should have told her differently,” said Hermione, still with that maddeningly patient air. “You should have said it was really

annoying, but I'd *made* you promise to come along to the Three Broomsticks, and you really didn't want to go, you'd much rather spend the whole day with her, but unfortunately you thought you really ought to meet me and would she please, please come along with you, and hopefully you'd be able to get away more quickly? And it might have been a good idea to mention how ugly you think I am too," Hermione added as an afterthought.

"But I don't think you're ugly," said Harry, bemused.

Hermione laughed.

"Harry, you're worse than Ron. . . . Well, no, you're not," she sighed, as Ron himself came stumping into the Hall splattered with mud and looking grumpy. "Look — you upset Cho when you said you were going to meet me, so she tried to make you jealous. It was her way of trying to find out how much you liked her."

"Is that what she was doing?" said Harry as Ron dropped onto the bench opposite them and pulled every dish within reach toward himself. "Well, wouldn't it have been easier if she'd just asked me whether I liked her better than you?"

"Girls don't often ask questions like that," said Hermione.

"Well, they should!" said Harry forcefully. "Then I could've just told her I fancy her, and she wouldn't have had to get herself all worked up again about Cedric dying!"

"I'm not saying what she did was sensible," said Hermione, as Ginny joined them, just as muddy as Ron and looking equally disgruntled. "I'm just trying to make you see how she was feeling at the time."

"You should write a book," Ron told Hermione as he cut up his

potatoes, “translating mad things girls do so boys can understand them.”

“Yeah,” said Harry fervently, looking over at the Ravenclaw table. Cho had just got up; still not looking at him, she left the Great Hall. Feeling rather depressed, he looked back at Ron and Ginny. “So, how was Quidditch practice?”

“It was a nightmare,” said Ron in a surly voice.

“Oh come on,” said Hermione, looking at Ginny, “I’m sure it wasn’t that —”

“Yes, it was,” said Ginny. “It was appalling. Angelina was nearly in tears by the end of it.”

Ron and Ginny went off for baths after dinner; Harry and Hermione returned to the busy Gryffindor common room and their usual pile of homework. Harry had been struggling with a new star chart for Astronomy for half an hour when Fred and George turned up.

“Ron and Ginny not here?” asked Fred, looking around as he pulled up a chair and, when Harry shook his head, he said, “Good. We were watching their practice. They’re going to be slaughtered. They’re complete rubbish without us.”

“Come on, Ginny’s not bad,” said George fairly, sitting down next to Fred. “Actually, I dunno how she got so good, seeing how we never let her play with us . . .”

“She’s been breaking into your broom shed in the garden since the age of six and taking each of your brooms out in turn when you weren’t looking,” said Hermione from behind her tottering pile of Ancient Rune books.

“Oh,” said George, looking mildly impressed. “Well — that’d explain it.”

“Has Ron saved a goal yet?” asked Hermione, peering over the top of *Magical Hieroglyphs and Logograms*.

“Well, he can do it if he doesn’t think anyone’s watching him,” said Fred, rolling his eyes. “So all we have to do is ask the crowd to turn their backs and talk among themselves every time the Quaffle goes up his end on Saturday.”

He got up again and moved restlessly to the window, staring out across the dark grounds.

“You know, Quidditch was about the only thing in this place worth staying for.”

Hermione cast him a stern look.

“You’ve got exams coming!”

“Told you already, we’re not fussed about N.E.W.T.s,” said Fred. “The Snackboxes are ready to roll, we found out how to get rid of those boils, just a couple of drops of murtlap essence sorts them, Lee put us onto it . . .”

George yawned widely and looked out disconsolately at the cloudy night sky.

“I dunno if I even want to watch this match. If Zacharias Smith beats us I might have to kill myself.”

“Kill him, more like,” said Fred firmly.

“That’s the trouble with Quidditch,” said Hermione absentmindedly, once again bent over her Rune translation, “it creates all this bad feeling and tension between the Houses.”

She looked up to find her copy of *Spellman’s Syllabary* and caught

Fred, George, and Harry looking at her with expressions of mingled disgust and incredulity on their faces.

“Well, it does!” she said impatiently. “It’s only a game, isn’t it?”

“Hermione,” said Harry, shaking his head, “you’re good on feelings and stuff, but you just don’t understand about Quidditch.”

“Maybe not,” she said darkly, returning to her translation again, “but at least my happiness doesn’t depend on Ron’s goalkeeping ability.”

And though Harry would rather have jumped off the Astronomy Tower than admit it to her, by the time he had watched the game the following Saturday he would have given any number of Galleons not to care about Quidditch either.

The very best thing you could say about the match was that it was short; the Gryffindor spectators had to endure only twenty-two minutes of agony. It was hard to say what the worst thing was: Harry thought it was a close-run contest between Ron’s fourteenth failed save, Sloper missing the Bludger but hitting Angelina in the mouth with his bat, and Kirke shrieking and falling backward off his broom as Zacharias Smith zoomed at him carrying the Quaffle. The miracle was that Gryffindor only lost by ten points: Ginny managed to snatch the Snitch from right under Hufflepuff Seeker Summerby’s nose, so that the final score was two hundred and forty versus two hundred and thirty.

“Good catch,” Harry told Ginny back in the common room, where the atmosphere closely resembled that of a particularly dismal funeral.

“I was lucky,” she shrugged. “It wasn’t a very fast Snitch and

Summerby's got a cold, he sneezed and closed his eyes at exactly the wrong moment. Anyway, once you're back on the team —"

"Ginny, I've got a lifelong ban."

"You're banned as long as Umbridge is in the school," Ginny corrected him. "There's a difference. Anyway, once you're back, I think I'll try out for Chaser. Angelina and Alicia are both leaving next year and I prefer goal-scoring to Seeking anyway."

Harry looked over at Ron, who was hunched in a corner, staring at his knees, a bottle of butterbeer clutched in his hand.

"Angelina still won't let him resign," Ginny said, as though reading Harry's mind. "She says she knows he's got it in him."

Harry liked Angelina for the faith she was showing in Ron, but at the same time thought it would really be kinder to let him leave the team. Ron had left the pitch to another booming chorus of "Weasley Is Our King" sung with great gusto by the Slytherins, who were now favorites to win the Quidditch Cup.

Fred and George wandered over.

"I haven't got the heart to take the mickey out of him, even," said Fred, looking over at Ron's crumpled figure. "Mind you . . . when he missed the fourteenth . . ."

He made wild motions with his arms as though doing an upright doggy-paddle.

"Well, I'll save it for parties, eh?"

Ron dragged himself up to bed shortly after this. Out of respect for his feelings, Harry waited a while before going up to the dormitory himself, so that Ron could pretend to be asleep if he wanted to. Sure enough, when Harry finally entered the room Ron was snoring a little

too loudly to be entirely plausible.

Harry got into bed, thinking about the match. It had been immensely frustrating watching from the sidelines. He was quite impressed by Ginny's performance but he felt that if he had been playing he could have caught the Snitch sooner. . . . There had been a moment when it had been fluttering near Kirke's ankle; if she hadn't hesitated, she might have been able to scrape a win for Gryffindor. . . .

Umbridge had been sitting a few rows below Harry and Hermione. Once or twice she had turned squatly in her seat to look at him, her wide toad's mouth stretched in what he thought had been a gloating smile. The memory of it made him feel hot with anger as he lay there in the dark. After a few minutes, however, he remembered that he was supposed to be emptying his mind of all emotion before he slept, as Snape kept instructing him at the end of every Occlumency lesson.

He tried for a moment or two, but the thought of Snape on top of memories of Umbridge merely increased his sense of grumbling resentment, and he found himself focusing instead on how much he loathed the pair of them. Slowly, Ron's snores died away, replaced by the sound of deep, slow breathing. It took Harry much longer to get to sleep; his body was tired, but it took his brain a long time to close down.

He dreamed that Neville and Professor Sprout were waltzing around the Room of Requirement while Professor McGonagall played the bagpipes. He watched them happily for a while, then decided to go and find the other members of the D.A. . . .

But when he left the room he found himself facing, not the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, but a torch burning in its bracket on a stone

wall. He turned his head slowly to the left. There, at the far end of the windowless passage, was a plain, black door.

He walked toward it with a sense of mounting excitement. He had the strangest feeling that this time he was going to get lucky at last, and find the way to open it. . . . He was feet from it and saw with a leap of excitement that there was a glowing strip of faint blue light down the right-hand side. . . . The door was ajar. . . . He stretched out his hand to push it wide and —

Ron gave a loud, rasping, genuine snore, and Harry awoke abruptly with his right hand stretched in front of him in the darkness, to open a door that was hundreds of miles away. He let it fall with a feeling of mingled disappointment and guilt. He knew he should not have seen the door, but at the same time, felt so consumed with curiosity about what was behind it that he could not help feeling annoyed with Ron. . . . If he could have saved his snore for just another minute . . .

They entered the Great Hall for breakfast at exactly the same moment as the post owls on Monday morning. Hermione was not the only person eagerly awaiting her *Daily Prophet*: Nearly everyone was eager for more news about the escaped Death Eaters, who, despite many reported sightings, had still not been caught. She gave the delivery owl a Knut and unfolded the newspaper eagerly while Harry helped himself to orange juice; as he had only received one note during the entire year he was sure, when the first owl landed with a thud in front of him, that it had made a mistake.

“Who’re you after?” he asked it, languidly removing his orange

juice from underneath its beak and leaning forward to see the recipient's name and address:

Harry Potter

Great Hall

Hogwarts School

Frowning, he made to take the letter from the owl, but before he could do so, three, four, five more owls had fluttered down beside it and were jockeying for position, treading in the butter, knocking over the salt, and each attempting to give him their letters first.

“What’s going on?” Ron asked in amazement, as the whole of Gryffindor table leaned forward to watch as another seven owls landed amongst the first ones, screeching, hooting, and flapping their wings.

“Harry!” said Hermione breathlessly, plunging her hands into the feathery mass and pulling out a screech owl bearing a long, cylindrical package. “I think I know what this means — open this one first!”

Harry ripped off the brown packaging. Out rolled a tightly furled copy of March’s edition of *The Quibbler*. He unrolled it to see his own face grinning sheepishly at him from the front cover. In large red letters across his picture were the words:

**HARRY POTTER SPEAKS OUT AT LAST: THE TRUTH
ABOUT HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED AND THE NIGHT
I SAW HIM RETURN**

“It’s good, isn’t it?” said Luna, who had drifted over to the Gryffindor table and now squeezed herself onto the bench between Fred and Ron. “It came out yesterday, I asked Dad to send you a free copy. I expect all these,” she waved a hand at the assembled owls still scrabbling around on the table in front of Harry, “are letters from readers.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Hermione eagerly, “Harry, d’you mind if we — ?”

“Help yourself,” said Harry, feeling slightly bemused.

Ron and Hermione both started ripping open envelopes.

“This one’s from a bloke who thinks you’re off your rocker,” said Ron, glancing down his letter. “Ah well . . .”

“This woman recommends you try a good course of Shock Spells at St. Mungo’s,” said Hermione, looking disappointed and crumpling up a second.

“This one looks okay, though,” said Harry slowly, scanning a long letter from a witch in Paisley. “Hey, she says she believes me!”

“This one’s in two minds,” said Fred, who had joined in the letter-opening with enthusiasm. “Says you don’t come across as a mad person, but he really doesn’t want to believe You-Know-Who’s back so he doesn’t know what to think now. . . . Blimey, what a waste of parchment . . .”

“Here’s another one you’ve convinced, Harry!” said Hermione excitedly. ““Having read your side of the story I am forced to the conclusion that the *Daily Prophet* has treated you very unfairly. Little though I want to think that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has

returned, I am forced to accept that you are telling the truth . . . ' Oh this is wonderful!"

"Another one who thinks you're barking," said Ron, throwing a crumpled letter over his shoulder, "but this one says you've got her converted, and she now thinks you're a real hero — she's put in a photograph too — wow —"

"What is going on here?" said a falsely sweet, girlish voice.

Harry looked up with his hands full of envelopes. Professor Umbridge was standing behind Fred and Luna, her bulging toad's eyes scanning the mess of owls and letters on the table in front of Harry. Behind her he saw many of the students watching them avidly.

"Why have you got all these letters, Mr. Potter?" she asked slowly.

"Is that a crime now?" said Fred loudly. "Getting mail?"

"Be careful, Mr. Weasley, or I shall have to put you in detention," said Umbridge. "Well, Mr. Potter?"

Harry hesitated, but he did not see how he could keep what he had done quiet; it was surely only a matter of time before a copy of *The Quibbler* came to Umbridge's attention.

"People have written to me because I gave an interview," said Harry. "About what happened to me last June."

For some reason he glanced up at the staff table as he said this. He had the strangest feeling that Dumbledore had been watching him a second before, but when he looked, Dumbledore seemed to be absorbed in conversation with Professor Flitwick.

"An interview?" repeated Umbridge, her voice thinner and higher than ever. "What do you mean?"

"I mean a reporter asked me questions and I answered them," said

Harry. "Here —"

And he threw the copy of *The Quibbler* at her. She caught it and stared down at the cover. Her pale, doughy face turned an ugly, patchy violet.

"When did you do this?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

"Last Hogsmeade weekend," said Harry.

She looked up at him, incandescent with rage, the magazine shaking in her stubby fingers.

"There will be no more Hogsmeade trips for you, Mr. Potter," she whispered. "How you dare . . . how you could . . ." She took a deep breath. "I have tried again and again to teach you not to tell lies. The message, apparently, has still not sunk in. Fifty points from Gryffindor and another week's worth of detentions."

She stalked away, clutching *The Quibbler* to her chest, the eyes of many students following her.

By mid-morning enormous signs had been put up all over the school, not just on House notice boards, but in the corridors and classrooms too.

===== BY ORDER OF =====

The High Inquisitor of Hogwarts

Any student found in possession of the magazine *The Quibbler* will be expelled.

*The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number
Twenty-seven.*

Signed:

Dolores Jane Umbridge

HIGH INQUISITOR



For some reason, every time Hermione caught sight of one of these signs she beamed with pleasure.

“What exactly are you so happy about?” Harry asked her.

“Oh Harry, don’t you see?” Hermione breathed. “If she could have done one thing to make absolutely sure that every single person in this school will read your interview, it was banning it!”

And it seemed that Hermione was quite right. By the end of that day, though Harry had not seen so much as a corner of *The Quibbler* anywhere in the school, the whole place seemed to be quoting the interview at each other; Harry heard them whispering about it as they queued up outside classes, discussing it over lunch and in the back of lessons, while Hermione even reported that every occupant of the cubicles in the girls’ toilets had been talking about it when she nipped in there before Ancient Runes.

“And then they spotted me, and obviously they know I know you, so they were bombarding me with questions,” Hermione told Harry, her eyes shining, “and Harry, I think they believe you, I really do, I think you’ve finally got them convinced!”

Meanwhile Professor Umbridge was stalking the school, stopping students at random and demanding that they turn out their books and pockets. Harry knew she was looking for copies of *The Quibbler*, but

the students were several steps ahead of her. The pages carrying Harry's interview had been bewitched to resemble extracts from textbooks if anyone but themselves read it, or else wiped magically blank until they wanted to peruse it again. Soon it seemed that every single person in the school had read it.

The teachers were, of course, forbidden from mentioning the interview by Educational Decree Number Twenty-six, but they found ways to express their feelings about it all the same. Professor Sprout awarded Gryffindor twenty points when Harry passed her a watering can; a beaming Professor Flitwick pressed a box of squeaking sugar mice on him at the end of Charms, said "*Shh!*" and hurried away; and Professor Trelawney broke into hysterical sobs during Divination and announced to the startled class, and a very disapproving Umbridge, that Harry was *not* going to suffer an early death after all, but would live to a ripe old age, become Minister of Magic, and have twelve children.

But what made Harry happiest was Cho catching up with him as he was hurrying along to Transfiguration the next day. Before he knew what had happened her hand was in his and she was breathing in his ear, "I'm really, really sorry. That interview was so brave . . . it made me cry."

He was sorry to hear she had shed even more tears over it, but very glad they were on speaking terms again, and even more pleased when she gave him a swift kiss on the cheek and hurried off again. And unbelievably, no sooner had he arrived outside Transfiguration than something just as good happened: Seamus stepped out of the queue to face him.

“I just wanted to say,” he mumbled, squinting at Harry’s left knee, “I believe you. And I’ve sent a copy of that magazine to me mam.”

If anything more was needed to complete Harry’s happiness, it was Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle’s reactions. He saw them with their heads together later that afternoon in the library, together with a weedy-looking boy Hermione whispered was called Theodore Nott. They looked around at Harry as he browsed the shelves for the book he needed on Partial Vanishment, and Goyle cracked his knuckles threateningly and Malfoy whispered something undoubtedly malevolent to Crabbe. Harry knew perfectly well why they were acting like this: He had named all of their fathers as Death Eaters.

“And the best bit is,” whispered Hermione gleefully as they left the library, “they can’t contradict you, because they can’t admit they’ve read the article!”

To cap it all, Luna told him over dinner that no copy of *The Quibbler* had ever sold out faster.

“Dad’s reprinting!” she told Harry, her eyes popping excitedly. “He can’t believe it, he says people seem even more interested in this than the Crumple-Horned Snorkacks!”

Harry was a hero in the Gryffindor common room that night; daringly, Fred and George had put an Enlargement Charm on the front cover of *The Quibbler* and hung it on the wall, so that Harry’s giant head gazed down upon the proceedings, occasionally saying things like “The Ministry are morons” and “Eat dung, Umbridge” in a booming voice. Hermione did not find this very amusing; she said it interfered with her concentration, and ended up going to bed early out of irritation. Harry had to admit that the poster was not quite as funny

after an hour or two, especially when the talking spell had started to wear off, so that it merely shouted disconnected words like “Dung” and “Umbridge” at more and more frequent intervals in a progressively higher voice. In fact it started to make his head ache and his scar began prickling uncomfortably again. To disappointed moans from the many people who were sitting around him, asking him to relive his interview for the umpteenth time, he announced that he too needed an early night.

The dormitory was empty when he reached it. He rested his forehead for a moment against the cool glass of the window beside his bed; it felt soothing against his scar. Then he undressed and got into bed, wishing his headache would go away. He also felt slightly sick. He rolled over onto his side, closed his eyes, and fell asleep almost at once. . . .

He was standing in a dark, curtained room lit by a single branch of candles. His hands were clenched on the back of a chair in front of him. They were long-fingered and white as though they had not seen sunlight for years and looked like large, pale spiders against the dark velvet of the chair.

Beyond the chair, in a pool of light cast upon the floor by the candles, knelt a man in black robes.

“I have been badly advised, it seems,” said Harry, in a high, cold voice that pulsed with anger.

“Master, I crave your pardon. . . .” croaked the man kneeling on the floor. The back of his head glimmered in the candlelight. He seemed to be trembling.

“I do not blame you, Rookwood,” said Harry in that cold, cruel

voice.

He relinquished his grip upon the chair and walked around it, closer to the man cowering upon the floor, until he stood directly over him in the darkness, looking down from a far greater height than usual.

“You are sure of your facts, Rookwood?” asked Harry.

“Yes, my Lord, yes . . . I used to work in the department after — after all . . .”

“Avery told me Bode would be able to remove it.”

“Bode could never have taken it, Master . . . Bode would have known he could not . . . Undoubtedly that is why he fought so hard against Malfoy’s Imperius Curse . . .”

“Stand up, Rookwood,” whispered Harry.

The kneeling man almost fell over in his haste to obey. His face was pockmarked; the scars were thrown into relief by the candlelight. He remained a little stooped when standing, as though halfway through a bow, and he darted terrified looks up at Harry’s face.

“You have done well to tell me this,” said Harry. “Very well . . . I have wasted months on fruitless schemes, it seems . . . But no matter . . . We begin again, from now. You have Lord Voldemort’s gratitude, Rookwood . . .”

“My Lord . . . yes, my Lord,” gasped Rookwood, his voice hoarse with relief.

“I shall need your help. I shall need all the information you can give me.”

“Of course, my Lord, of course . . . anything . . .”

“Very well . . . you may go. Send Avery to me.”

Rookwood scurried backward, bowing, and disappeared through a door.

Left alone in the dark room, Harry turned toward the wall. A cracked, age-spotted mirror hung on the wall in the shadows. Harry moved toward it. His reflection grew larger and clearer in the darkness. . . . A face whiter than a skull . . . red eyes with slits for pupils . . .

“NOOOOOOOOOO!”

“What?” yelled a voice nearby.

Harry flailed around madly, became entangled in the hangings, and fell out of his bed. For a few seconds he did not know where he was; he was convinced that he was about to see the white, skull-like face looming at him out of the dark again, then Ron’s voice spoke very near to him.

“Will you stop acting like a maniac, and I can get you out of here!”

Ron wrenched the hangings apart, and Harry stared up at him in the moonlight, as he lay flat on his back, his scar searing with pain. Ron looked as though he had just been getting ready for bed; one arm was out of his robes.

“Has someone been attacked again?” asked Ron, pulling Harry roughly to his feet. “Is it Dad? Is it that snake?”

“No — everyone’s fine —” gasped Harry, whose forehead felt as though it was on fire again. “Well . . . Avery isn’t. . . . He’s in trouble. . . . He gave him the wrong information. . . . He’s really angry . . .”

Harry groaned and sank, shaking, onto his bed, rubbing his scar.

“But Rookwood’s going to help him now. . . . He’s on the right track again . . .”

“What are you talking about?” said Ron, sounding scared. “D’you mean . . . did you just see You-Know-Who?”

“I *was* You-Know-Who,” said Harry, and he stretched out his hands in the darkness and held them up to his face to check that they were no longer deathly white and long-fingered. “He was with Rookwood, he’s one of the Death Eaters who escaped from Azkaban, remember? Rookwood’s just told him Bode couldn’t have done it . . .”

“Done what?”

“Remove something. . . . He said Bode would have known he couldn’t have done it. . . . Bode was under the Imperius Curse. . . . I think he said Malfoy’s dad put it on him . . .”

“Bode was bewitched to remove something?” Ron said. “But — Harry, that’s got to be —”

“The weapon,” Harry finished the sentence for him. “I know.”

The dormitory door opened; Dean and Seamus came in. Harry swung his legs back into bed. He did not want to look as though anything odd had just happened, seeing as Seamus had only just stopped thinking Harry was a nutter.

“Did you say,” murmured Ron, putting his head close to Harry’s on the pretense of helping himself to water from the jug on his bedside table, “that you *were* You-Know-Who?”

“Yeah,” said Harry quietly.

Ron took an unnecessarily large gulp of water. Harry saw it spill over his chin onto his chest.

“Harry,” he said, as Dean and Seamus clattered around noisily, pulling off their robes, and talking, “you’ve got to tell —”

“I haven’t got to tell anyone,” said Harry shortly. “I wouldn’t have seen it at all if I could do Occlumency. I’m supposed to have learned to shut this stuff out. That’s what they want.”

By “they” he meant Dumbledore. He got back into bed and rolled over onto his side with his back to Ron and after a while he heard Ron’s mattress creak as he lay back down too. His scar began to burn; he bit hard on his pillow to stop himself making a noise. Somewhere, he knew, Avery was being punished.

Harry and Ron waited until break next morning to tell Hermione exactly what had happened. They wanted to be absolutely sure they could not be overheard. Standing in their usual corner of the cool and breezy courtyard, Harry told her every detail of the dream he could remember. When he had finished, she said nothing at all for a few moments, but stared with a kind of painful intensity at Fred and George, who were both headless and selling their magical hats from under their cloaks on the other side of the yard.

“So that’s why they killed him,” she said quietly, withdrawing her gaze from Fred and George at last. “When Bode tried to steal this weapon, something funny happened to him. I think there must be defensive spells on it, or around it, to stop people from touching it. That’s why he was in St. Mungo’s, his brain had gone all funny and he couldn’t talk. But remember what the Healer told us? He was recovering. And they couldn’t risk him getting better, could they? I mean, the shock of whatever happened when he touched that weapon

probably made the Imperius Curse lift. Once he'd got his voice back, he'd explain what he'd been doing, wouldn't he? They would have known he'd been sent to steal the weapon. Of course, it would have been easy for Lucius Malfoy to put the curse on him. Never out of the Ministry, is he?"

"He was even hanging around that day I had my hearing," said Harry. "In the — hang on . . ." he said slowly. "He was in the Department of Mysteries corridor that day! Your dad said he was probably trying to sneak down and find out what happened in my hearing, but what if —"

"Sturgis," gasped Hermione, looking thunderstruck.

"Sorry?" said Ron, looking bewildered.

"Sturgis Podmore," said Hermione, breathlessly. "Arrested for trying to get through a door. Lucius Malfoy got him too. I bet he did it the day you saw him there, Harry. Sturgis had Moody's Invisibility Cloak, right? So what if he was standing guard by the door, invisible, and Malfoy heard him move, or guessed he was there, or just did the Imperius Curse on the off chance that a guard was there? So when Sturgis next had an opportunity — probably when it was his turn on guard duty again — he tried to get into the department to steal the weapon for Voldemort — Ron, be quiet — but he got caught and sent to Azkaban . . ."

She gazed at Harry.

"And now Rookwood's told Voldemort how to get the weapon?"

"I didn't hear all the conversation, but that's what it sounded like," said Harry. "Rookwood used to work there. . . . Maybe Voldemort'll send Rookwood to do it?"

Hermione nodded, apparently still lost in thought. Then, quite abruptly, she said, "But you shouldn't have seen this at all, Harry."

"What?" he said, taken aback.

"You're supposed to be learning how to close your mind to this sort of thing," said Hermione, suddenly stern.

"I know I am," said Harry. "But —"

"Well, I think we should just try and forget what you saw," said Hermione firmly. "And you ought to put in a bit more effort on your Occlumency from now on."

The week did not improve as it progressed. Harry received two more D's in Potions, was still on tenterhooks that Hagrid might get the sack, and could not stop himself from dwelling on the dream in which he had seen Voldemort, though he did not bring it up with Ron and Hermione again because he did not want another telling-off from Hermione. He wished very much that he could have talked to Sirius about it, but that was out of the question, so he tried to push the matter to the back of his mind.

Unfortunately, the back of his mind was no longer the secure place it had once been.

"Get up, Potter."

A couple of weeks after his dream of Rookwood, Harry was to be found, yet again, kneeling on the floor of Snape's office, trying to clear his head. He had just been forced, yet again, to relive a stream of very early memories he had not even realized he still had, most of them concerning humiliations Dudley and his gang had inflicted upon him in primary school.

"That last memory," said Snape. "What was it?"

“I don’t know,” said Harry, getting wearily to his feet. He was finding it increasingly difficult to disentangle separate memories from the rush of images and sound that Snape kept calling forth. “You mean the one where my cousin tried to make me stand in the toilet?”

“No,” said Snape softly. “I mean the one concerning a man kneeling in the middle of a darkened room . . .”

“It’s . . . nothing,” said Harry.

Snape’s dark eyes bored into Harry’s. Remembering what Snape had said about eye contact being crucial to Legilimency, Harry blinked and looked away.

“How do that man and that room come to be inside your head, Potter?” said Snape.

“It —” said Harry, looking everywhere but at Snape, “it was — just a dream I had.”

“A dream,” repeated Snape.

There was a pause during which Harry stared fixedly at a large dead frog suspended in a purple liquid in its jar.

“You do know why we are here, don’t you, Potter?” said Snape in a low, dangerous voice. “You do know why I am giving up my evenings to this tedious job?”

“Yes,” said Harry stiffly.

“Remind me why we are here, Potter.”

“So I can learn Occlumency,” said Harry, now glaring at a dead eel.

“Correct, Potter. And dim though you may be” — Harry looked back at Snape, hating him — “I would have thought that after two months’ worth of lessons you might have made some progress. How

many other dreams about the Dark Lord have you had?"

"Just that one," lied Harry.

"Perhaps," said Snape, his dark, cold eyes narrowing slightly, "perhaps you actually enjoy having these visions and dreams, Potter. Maybe they make you feel special — important?"

"No, they don't," said Harry, his jaw set and his fingers clenched tightly around the handle of his wand.

"That is just as well, Potter," said Snape coldly, "because you are neither special nor important, and it is not up to you to find out what the Dark Lord is saying to his Death Eaters."

"No — that's your job, isn't it?" Harry shot at him.

He had not meant to say it; it had burst out of him in temper. For a long moment they stared at each other, Harry convinced he had gone too far. But there was a curious, almost satisfied expression on Snape's face when he answered.

"Yes, Potter," he said, his eyes glinting, "That is my job. Now, if you are ready, we will start again . . ."

He raised his wand. "One — two — three — *Legilimens!*"

A hundred dementors were swooping toward Harry across the lake in the grounds. . . . He screwed up his face in concentration. . . . They were coming closer. . . . He could see the dark holes beneath their hoods . . . yet he could also see Snape standing in front of him, his eyes fixed upon Harry's face, muttering under his breath. . . . And somehow, Snape was growing clearer, and the dementors were growing fainter . . .

Harry raised his own wand.

"*Protego!*"

Snape staggered; his wand flew upward, away from Harry — and suddenly Harry's mind was teeming with memories that were not his — a hook-nosed man was shouting at a cowering woman, while a small dark-haired boy cried in a corner. . . . A greasy-haired teenager sat alone in a dark bedroom, pointing his wand at the ceiling, shooting down flies. . . . A girl was laughing as a scrawny boy tried to mount a bucking broomstick —

“ENOUGH!”

Harry felt as though he had been pushed hard in the chest; he took several staggering steps backward, hit some of the shelves covering Snape's walls and heard something crack. Snape was shaking slightly, very white in the face.

The back of Harry's robes were damp. One of the jars behind him had broken when he fell against it; the pickled slimy thing within was swirling in its draining potion.

“*Reparo!*” hissed Snape, and the jar sealed itself once more. “Well, Potter . . . that was certainly an improvement . . .” Panting slightly, Snape straightened the Pensieve in which he had again stored some of his thoughts before starting the lesson, almost as though checking that they were still there. “I don't remember telling you to use a Shield Charm . . . but there is no doubt that it was effective . . .”

Harry did not speak; he felt that to say anything might be dangerous. He was sure he had just broken into Snape's memories, that he had just seen scenes from Snape's childhood, and it was unnerving to think that the crying little boy who had watched his parents shouting was actually standing in front of him with such

loathing in his eyes. . . .

“Let’s try again, shall we?” said Snape.

Harry felt a thrill of dread: He was about to pay for what had just happened, he was sure of it. They moved back into position with the desk between them, Harry feeling he was going to find it much harder to empty his mind this time. . . .

“On the count of three, then,” said Snape, raising his wand once more. “One — two —”

Harry did not have time to gather himself together and attempt to clear his mind, for Snape had already cried “*Legilimens!*”

He was hurtling along the corridor toward the Department of Mysteries, past the blank stone walls, past the torches — the plain black door was growing ever larger; he was moving so fast he was going to collide with it, he was feet from it and he could see that chink of faint blue light again —

The door had flown open! He was through it at last, inside a black-walled, black-floored circular room lit with blue-flamed candles, and there were more doors all around him — he needed to go on — but which door ought he to take — ?

“POTTER!”

Harry opened his eyes. He was flat on his back again with no memory of having gotten there; he was also panting as though he really had run the length of the Department of Mysteries corridor, really had sprinted through the black door and found the circular room. . . .

“Explain yourself!” said Snape, who was standing over him, looking furious.

"I . . . dunno what happened," said Harry truthfully, standing up. There was a lump on the back of his head from where he had hit the ground and he felt feverish. "I've never seen that before. I mean, I told you, I've dreamed about the door . . . but it's never opened before . . ."

"You are not working hard enough!"

For some reason, Snape seemed even angrier than he had done two minutes before, when Harry had seen into his own memories.

"You are lazy and sloppy, Potter, it is small wonder that the Dark Lord —"

"Can you tell me something, *sir*?" said Harry, firing up again. "Why do you call Voldemort the Dark Lord, I've only ever heard Death Eaters call him that —"

Snape opened his mouth in a snarl — and a woman screamed from somewhere outside the room.

Snape's head jerked upward; he was gazing at the ceiling.

"What the — ?" he muttered.

Harry could hear a muffled commotion coming from what he thought might be the entrance hall. Snape looked around at him, frowning.

"Did you see anything unusual on your way down here, Potter?"

Harry shook his head. Somewhere above them, the woman screamed again. Snape strode to his office door, his wand still held at the ready, and swept out of sight. Harry hesitated for a moment, then followed.

The screams were indeed coming from the entrance hall; they grew louder as Harry ran toward the stone steps leading up from the

dungeons. When he reached the top he found the entrance hall packed. Students had come flooding out of the Great Hall, where dinner was still in progress, to see what was going on. Others had crammed themselves onto the marble staircase. Harry pushed forward through a knot of tall Slytherins and saw that the onlookers had formed a great ring, some of them looking shocked, others even frightened. Professor McGonagall was directly opposite Harry on the other side of the hall; she looked as though what she was watching made her feel faintly sick.

Professor Trelawney was standing in the middle of the entrance hall with her wand in one hand and an empty sherry bottle in the other, looking utterly mad. Her hair was sticking up on end, her glasses were lopsided so that one eye was magnified more than the other; her innumerable shawls and scarves were trailing haphazardly from her shoulders, giving the impression that she was falling apart at the seams. Two large trunks lay on the floor beside her, one of them upside down; it looked very much as though it had been thrown down the stairs after her. Professor Trelawney was staring, apparently terrified, at something Harry could not see but that seemed to be standing at the foot of the stairs.

“No!” she shrieked. “NO! This cannot be happening. . . . It cannot . . . I refuse to accept it!”

“You didn’t realize this was coming?” said a high girlish voice, sounding callously amused, and Harry, moving slightly to his right, saw that Trelawney’s terrifying vision was nothing other than Professor Umbridge. “Incapable though you are of predicting even tomorrow’s weather, you must surely have realized that your pitiful

performance during my inspections, and lack of any improvement, would make it inevitable you would be sacked?"

"You c-can't!" howled Professor Trelawney, tears streaming down her face from behind her enormous lenses, "you c-can't sack me! I've b-been here sixteen years! H-Hogwarts is m-my h-home!"

"It *was* your home," said Professor Umbridge, and Harry was revolted to see the enjoyment stretching her toadlike face as she watched Professor Trelawney sink, sobbing uncontrollably, onto one of her trunks, "until an hour ago, when the Minister of Magic countersigned the order for your dismissal. Now kindly remove yourself from this hall. You are embarrassing us."

But she stood and watched, with an expression of gloating enjoyment, as Professor Trelawney shuddered and moaned, rocking backward and forward on her trunk in paroxysms of grief. Harry heard a sob to his left and looked around. Lavender and Parvati were both crying silently, their arms around each other. Then he heard footsteps. Professor McGonagall had broken away from the spectators, marched straight up to Professor Trelawney and was patting her firmly on the back while withdrawing a large handkerchief from within her robes.

"There, there, Sybill . . . Calm down. . . . Blow your nose on this. . . . It's not as bad as you think, now. . . . You are not going to have to leave Hogwarts. . . ."

"Oh really, Professor McGonagall?" said Umbridge in a deadly voice, taking a few steps forward. "And your authority for that statement is . . . ?"

"That would be mine," said a deep voice.

The oak front doors had swung open. Students beside them scuttled out of the way as Dumbledore appeared in the entrance. What he had been doing out in the grounds Harry could not imagine, but there was something impressive about the sight of him framed in the doorway against an oddly misty night. Leaving the doors wide behind him, he strode forward through the circle of onlookers toward the place where Professor Trelawney sat, tearstained and trembling, upon her trunk, Professor McGonagall alongside her.

“Yours, Professor Dumbledore?” said Umbridge with a singularly unpleasant little laugh. “I’m afraid you do not understand the position. I have here” — she pulled a parchment scroll from within her robes — “an Order of Dismissal signed by myself and the Minister of Magic. Under the terms of Educational Decree Number Twenty-three, the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts has the power to inspect, place upon probation, and sack any teacher she — that is to say, I — feel is not performing up to the standard required by the Ministry of Magic. I have decided that Professor Trelawney is not up to scratch. I have dismissed her.”

To Harry’s very great surprise, Dumbledore continued to smile. He looked down at Professor Trelawney, who was still sobbing and choking on her trunk, and said, “You are quite right, of course, Professor Umbridge. As High Inquisitor you have every right to dismiss my teachers. You do not, however, have the authority to send them away from the castle. I am afraid,” he went on, with a courteous little bow, “that the power to do that still resides with the headmaster, and it is my wish that Professor Trelawney continue to live at Hogwarts.”

At this, Professor Trelawney gave a wild little laugh in which a hiccup was barely hidden.

“No — no, I’ll g-go, Dumbledore! I sh-shall l-leave Hogwarts and s-seek my fortune elsewhere —”

“No,” said Dumbledore sharply. “It is my wish that you remain, Sybill.”

He turned to Professor McGonagall.

“Might I ask you to escort Sybill back upstairs, Professor McGonagall?”

“Of course,” said McGonagall. “Up you get, Sybill . . .”

Professor Sprout came hurrying forward out of the crowd and grabbed Professor Trelawney’s other arm. Together they guided her past Umbridge and up the marble stairs. Professor Flitwick went scurrying after them, his wand held out before him; he squeaked, “*Locomotor trunks!*” and Professor Trelawney’s luggage rose into the air and proceeded up the staircase after her, Professor Flitwick bringing up the rear.

Professor Umbridge was standing stock-still, staring at Dumbledore, who continued to smile benignly.

“And what,” she said in a whisper that nevertheless carried all around the entrance hall, “are you going to do with her once I appoint a new Divination teacher who needs her lodgings?”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem,” said Dumbledore pleasantly. “You see, I have already found us a new Divination teacher, and he will prefer lodgings on the ground floor.”

“You’ve found — ?” said Umbridge shrilly. “*You’ve* found? Might I remind you, Dumbledore, that under Educational Decree Twenty-

two —”

“— the Ministry has the right to appoint a suitable candidate if — and only if — the headmaster is unable to find one,” said Dumbledore. “And I am happy to say that on this occasion I have succeeded. May I introduce you?”

He turned to face the open front doors, through which night mist was now drifting. Harry heard hooves. There was a shocked murmur around the hall and those nearest the doors hastily moved even farther backward, some of them tripping over in their haste to clear a path for the newcomer.

Through the mist came a face Harry had seen once before on a dark, dangerous night in the Forbidden Forest: white-blond hair and astonishingly blue eyes, the head and torso of a man joined to the palomino body of a horse.

“This is Firenze,” said Dumbledore happily to a thunderstruck Umbridge. “I think you’ll find him suitable.”

Die voorsiene en die onvoorsiene

Mania sê op haar gewone vae manier dat sy nie weet hoe gou Rika se onderhoud met Harry in *Die Vitter* gaan verskyn nie, omdat haar pa 'n lang artikel verwag oor mense wat frommelhoring-snorklappe gesien het. "Dis 'n baie belangrike storie, Harry s'n sal dalk tot die volgende uitgawe moet oorstaan."

Dit was nie vir Harry maklik om te praat oor die nag toe Woldemort teruggekeer het nie. Rika het hom haarfyn uitgevra en hy het vir haar alles vertel wat hy kan onthou, want hy't besef dis sy geleentheid om vir die wêreld die waarheid te vertel. Hy wonder hoe mense daarop gaan reageer. Baie gaan seker dink hy's van sy trollie af, veral as sy storie langs sulke absolute onsin soos frommelhoring-snorklappe verskyn. Maar Bellatrix Lestrange en haar mede-Doodseters se ontsnapping het 'n brandende begeerte in hom laat ontstaan om iets te doen, of dit nou werk of nie.

"Ek kan nie wag om te sien wat Umbridge daarvan gaan sê nie," sê Dean die Maandagaand tydens ete. Septimus sit langs Dean en is besig om sy hoender-en-ham-pastei in te gaffel, maar Harry kan sien dat hy luister.

"Jy doen die regte ding, Harry," sê Neville, wat oorkant hom sit en taamlik bleek lyk. Hy voeg in 'n gedempte stem by: "Dit moet nogal swaar gewees het om daaroor te praat, nie waar nie?"

"Ja," prewel Harry. "Maar mense moet weet waartoe Woldemort in staat is, of wat dink jy?"

"Dis waar," Neville knik. "En sy Doodseters ook. Mense moet weet."

Neville sê niks verder nie, maar takel weer sy gebakte aartappel. Septimus kyk op, vang Harry se oog en kyk vinnig af na sy bord. Ná 'n rukkie gaan Dean, Septimus en Neville geselskamer toe. Harry en Hermien bly agter om vir Ron te wag, wat nog nie geëet het nie omdat hy Kwiddiek moes oefen.

Cho Chang kom saam met haar vriendin Marietta in. Harry se

maag gee 'n aardige draai, maar Cho kyk nie na die Griffindor-tafel nie en gaan sit met haar rug na hom.

“O ja, ek wou nog vra –” sê Hermien opgewek en kyk na die Raweklou-tafel. “Wat het gebeur tydens jou afspraak met Cho? Hoe-kom was jy so vroeg?”

“Hm . . . wel, dit was . . .” Harry trek 'n bak rabarberkrummelkoek nader en skep 'n tweede porsie in, “'n totale fiasko, as jy dan moet weet.”

Hy vertel vir haar presies wat in Madame Polfyn se koffiewinkel gebeur het.

“ . . . en toe,” sluit hy af nadat hy sy laaste happie krummelkoek afgesluk het, “spring sy op en sê: ‘Sien jou, Harry,’ en hardloop uit!” Hy sit sy lepel neer en staar na Hermien. “Ek bedoel, wat moet ek daarvan dink? Wat makeer haar?”

Hermien kyk na Cho se agterkop en sug.

“Ai, Harry,” sê sy verdrietig. “Wel, ek is jammer, maar jy was 'n bietjie taktloos.”

“Ek, taktloos?” sê Harry verontwaardig. “Die een oomblik is alles oukei en net die volgende oomblik vertel sy vir my dat Roger Davies haar gevra het om met hom uit te gaan en hoe sy en Cedric in daardie simpel koffiewinkel sit en vry het – hoe moet *ek* miskien voel?”

“Wel, jy sien,” sê Hermien met die geduld van iemand wat vir 'n ooremosionele kleuter moet verduidelik dat een plus een twee is, “jy moes nie halfpad deur julle afspraak vir haar gesê het dat jy my moet sien nie.”

“Maar . . . maar,” sputter Harry, “maar jy't gesê ek moet jou om twaalfuur kry en dat ek haar moet saambring – hoe moes ek dit doen sonder om vir haar te sê?”

“Jy moes dit anders gestel het,” sê Hermien op dieselfde irriterend geduldige manier. “Jy moes gesê het dis nou regtig baie lastig, maar ek het jou laat *belowe* dat jy my by die Drie Besemstokke sal kry en jy's glad nie lus nie; jy wil baie eerder die hele dag by *haar* wees, maar ongelukkig moet jy my nou sien en sal sy asseblief, *asseblief* saamkom, want dan sal jy hopelik gouer kan wegkom. En dit sou ook 'n goeie idee gewees het om iets te sê oor hoe lelik ek is,” voeg Hermien by.

“Maar ek dink nie jy's lelik nie,” sê Harry verward.

Hermien lag.

“Harry, jy's erger as Ron . . . Wel, nee, nie regtig nie,” sug sy toe Ron op daardie oomblik vol modder en baie nors by die Groot Saal instap. “Hoor hier – jy't vir Cho ontstel toe jy gesê het jy moet my ontmoet en toe't sy probeer om jou jaloers te maak. Dit was haar manier om uit te vind hoeveel jy van haar hou.”

"Is dit wat dit was?" sê Harry terwyl Ron oorkant hulle neersak en alle skottels binne grypafstand nader trek. "Hoekom het sy nie net gevra of ek meer van haar hou as van jou nie?"

"Meisies vra nie sommer sulke goed nie," sê Hermien.

"Wel, hulle behoort!" sê Harry vies. "Dan kon ek vir haar gesê het ek hou baie van haar en dan het sy haar nie weer oor Cedric opgewerk wat doodgaan nie!"

"Ek sê nie sy het verstandig opgetree nie," sê Hermien toe Ginny ook by hulle kom sit, net so knorrig en vol modder soos Ron. "Ek probeer net vir jou verduidelik hoe sy op daardie oomblik gevoel het."

"Jy moet 'n boek skryf," sê Ron vir Hermien terwyl hy sy aartappels opsny, "waarin jy al hierdie simpel goed wat meisies doen vir seuns uitleë."

"Ja," sê Harry vurig. Hy kyk na die Raweklou-tafel. Cho het pas opgestaan en sonder om in sy rigting te kyk uit die Groot Saal gestap. Hy voel omtrent bekaf toe hy weer na Ron en Ginny kyk. "Hoe was die Kwiddiekoefening?"

"Dit was 'n nagmerrie," sê Ron bedruk.

"Ag, komaan," sê Hermien en kyk na Ginny. "Ek is seker dit was nie so –"

"Ja, dit was!" sê Ginny. "Dit was verskriklik. Angelina het teen die einde amper begin huil."

Ná ete gaan Ron en Ginny bad, terwyl Harry en Hermien na die woelige Griffindor-geselskamer en hul gewone stapel huiswerk gaan. Harry worstel reeds 'n halfuur lank met 'n nuwe Astronomie-sierkaart toe Fred en George daar opdaag.

"Is Ron en Ginny nie hier nie?" Fred kyk om hom rond en trek 'n stoel nader. Toe Harry sy kop skud, sê hy: "Hoor hier, ons het gaan kyk hoe hulle oefen. Dit gaan 'n slagting wees. Die span is 'n totale gemors sonder ons."

"Komaan, Ginny is nie so sleg nie," sê George redelik. Hy gaan sit langs Fred. "Ek moet sê, ek weet nie hoe sy so goed kan wees nie, ons het haar nooit saam met ons laat speel nie."

"Sy breek al van sy ses is by julle skuur in en steel julle besems wanneer julle nie kyk nie," sê Hermien van agter 'n stapel boeke oor Antieke Runes.

"O!" George lyk beïndruk. "So dis wat aangaan."

"Kon Ron al 'n doel keer?" Hermien loer oor haar Magiese Hiërogliewe en Logogramme.

"Wel, hy kan as hy dink niemand kyk nie." Fred rol sy oë. "Al wat ons moet doen, is om die mense te vra om weg te kyk en met mekaar te praat elke keer dat die Swelger Saterdag naby hom kom."

Hy staan op, stap na die venster en staar oor die donker terrein. "Weet julle, Kwiddiek was omtrent al wat dié plek die moeite werd gemaak het."

Hermien kyk streng na hom.

"Daar's die eksamens!"

"Ek sê mos vir jou, ons is nie oor die OTTe gepla nie," sê Fred. "Die Snoepies is gereed; ons weet selfs hoe om van daardie swere ontslae te raak. 'n Paar druppels murklap is al wat nodig is. Lee he ons die werk gegee."

George gaap groot en kyk mistroostig na die bewolkte lug buite die venster.

"Ek weet nie eens of ek na hierdie wedstryd wil gaan kyk nie. As Sagrys Smit ons klop, vermoor ek myself."

"Vermoor eerder vir hom," sê Fred ferm.

"Dis die moeilikheid met Kwiddiek," sê Hermien argeloos terwyl sy weer aan haar runevertaling begin werk. "Dit skep al hierdie slegte gevoelens en spanning tussen die huise."

Sy kyk op om haar eksemplaar van die *Groot Toorwoordeboek* te vat en sien hoe Fred, George en Harry met uitdrukkings van walging gemeng met ongeloof na haar staar.

"Wel, dit is so!" sê sy ongeduldig. "Dis mos net 'n speletjie!"

"Hermien," sê Harry en skud sy kop, "jy is baie goed met gevoelens en sulke goed, maar jy verstaan niks van Kwiddiek nie."

"Seker nie," sê sy somber en gaan voort met haar vertaling. "Maar ten minste hang my geluk nie af van hoe 'n goeie Wagter Ron is nie."

En hoewel Harry eerder van die Astronomie-toring sal afspring voor hy dit sal erken, voel hy na die wedstryd die volgende Saterdag dat hy baie Galjoene sal gee om ook so ongeërg oor Kwiddiek te voel.

Die beste ding wat jy van die wedstryd kan sê, is dat dit gou verby was. Die Griffindor-ondersteuners moes net twee-en-twintig minute van ellende verduur. Dis moeilik om te besluit wat die laagtepunt was: Harry kan kies tussen Ron se veertiende mislukte keerslag, Sloper wat die Moker mis, maar vir Angelina met sy kolf deur die gesig slaan, en Kriek wat skreeuend van sy besem aftuimel toe Sagrys Smit met die Swelger op hom afstorm. Dis 'n wonderwerk dat Griffindor met net tien punte verloor het: Ginny het die Snip weggeraap onder Summerby, Hoesenproes se Soeker, se neus sodat die eindtelling tweehonderd-en-veertig versus tweehonderd-en-dertig was.

"Goeie vangskoot," sê Harry vir Ginny in die geselskamer, wat op daardie oomblik meer soos 'n besonder somber begrafnis voel.

“Dit was ’n gelukskoot,” sê sy skouerophalend. “Dit was nie ’n baie vinnige Snip nie en Summerby was verkoue. Hy’t op die verkeerde oomblik sy oë toegeknyp en genies. In elk geval, as jy eers weer terug is in die span –”

“Ginny, ek is lewenslank verban.”

“Jy’s verban vir solank Umbridge in die skool is,” help Ginny hom reg. “Daar’s ’n verskil. In elk geval, as jy weer terug is, gaan ek vir jaer probeer. Angelina en Katie gaan albei volgende jaar weg en ek wil eerder doele kry as Soeker wees.”

Harry kyk na Ron wat geboë in ’n hoek sit met ’n bottel Bouterbier in sy hand en na sy knieë staar.

“Angelina wil hom nog steeds nie laat loop nie,” sê Ginny asof sy Harry se gedagtes lees. “Sy sê sy weet hy kan dit doen.”

Harry is bly dat Angelina soveel vertrouwe in Ron het, maar hy voel tog dit sal beter wees om hom maar te laat gaan. Toe Ron die veld verlaat het, het die Slibberins, tans die voorlopers in die stryd om die Kwiddiekbeker, weer daverend “Weasley is ons Koning” gesing.

Fred en George stap nader.

“Ek sien nie eens kans om hom te terg nie,” sê Fred en staar na Ron se geboë figuur. “Maar ek moet sê . . . toe hy die veertiende doel mis –” Hy swaai sy arms wild asof hy in die lug hondjiekrap swem. “Wel, ek sal dit maar hou vir partytjies.”

Ron sleep homself kort daarna bed toe. Uit respek vir sy gevoelens wag Harry ’n rukkie voor hy ook boontoe gaan sodat Ron kan maak of hy slaap as hy wil. Nes Harry verwag het, snork Ron net daardie bietjie te hard om oortuigend te wees toe hy in die slaapsaal kom.

Harry klim in sy bed en dink aan die wedstryd. Dit was ontset-tend frustrerend om op die kantlyn te sit en kyk. Hy was nogal beïndruk met Ginny se spel, maar hy sou die Snip baie gouer gevang het . . . dit het vir ’n oomblik langs Kriek se enkel gefladder. As Ginny nie toe geaarsel het nie, het Griffindor dalk net-net gewen.

Umbridge het ’n paar rye onderkant Harry en Hermien gesit en een of twee keer omgedraai om met haar breë paddagesig na hom te kyk. Die herinnering aan haar triomfantlike glimlag laat Harry warm word van woede. Hy onthou eers ’n hele ruk later dat hy veronderstel is om alle emosie uit sy gedagtes te weer voor hy aan die slaap raak. Snerp sê dit aan die einde van elke Okklumensie-les.

Hy probeer hard, maar die gedagte aan Snerp, bo en behalwe Umbridge, laat hom nog wreweliger voel en hy besef dat hy op sy haat vir hulle konsentreer. Ron se gemaakte gesnork gaan geleidelik

oor in 'n stadige, reëlmatige asemhaling. Dit neem Harry baie langer om aan die slaap te raak. Sy liggaam is moeg, maar sy brein weier om tot rus te kom.

Hy droom dat Neville en professor Spruit deur die Vertrek van Vereistes wals terwyl professor McGonagall op 'n doedelsak speel. Hy kyk 'n rukkie na hulle en besluit dan om die ander lede van die DS te gaan soek.

Toe hy uitstap, is die tapisserie van Barnabas die Besetene nie teen die oorkantste muur nie. Daar is 'n brandende fakkel in 'n klamp teen die klipmuur en hy kyk behoedsaam in die gang af. Daar, aan die onderkant van 'n gang sonder vensters, is die eenvoudige swart deur.

Dis met stygende opwinding dat hy soontoe stap. Hy het 'n vreemde gevoel dat hy hierdie keer uiteindelik daarin gaan slaag om dit oop te maak . . . hy is 'n paar tree daarvandaan toe hy met 'n skok 'n dowwe blou strook lig aan die regterkant sien . . . die deur staan op 'n skrefie oop . . . hy steek sy hand uit om dit wyd oop te stoot en –

Ron gee 'n harde, skor, egte snork en Harry skrik wakker met sy regterhand uitgestrek in die donker voor hom, gereed om 'n deur honderde kilometers daarvandaan oop te maak. Hy laat sak sy hand met 'n mengsel van teleurstelling en skuldgevoelens. Hy weet hy mag nie soontoe gaan nie, maar hy is so nuuskierig oor wat daaragter is dat hy nie kan help om vir Ron vies te voel nie . . . as dit nie vir daardie snork van hom was nie.

Hulle kom daardie Maandagoggend vir ontbyt in die Groot Saal aan net toe die posuile opdaag. Hermien is nie die enigste persoon wat gretig op haar *Daaglikse Profeet* wag nie: amper almal is uitgehonger vir nuus oor die ontsnapte Doodseters, wat, ten spyte van allerhande berigte oor waar hulle gesien is, nog steeds op vrye voet is. Hermien gee vir die afleweringsuil 'n Knoet en maak die koerant gretig oop terwyl Harry vir hom lemoensap skink. Hy het die hele jaar nog net een brief gekry en toe 'n uil met 'n slag voor hom land, is hy seker dis 'n fout.

“Vir wie soek jy?” vra hy terwyl hy sy glas versigtig onder die uil se snawel uittrek en vorentoe leun om die ontvanger se naam en adres te lees:

Harry Potter
Groot Saal
Hogwarts

Harry steek sy hand fronsend uit, maar voor hy die brief by die uil kan neem, land nog drie, vier, vyf uile fladderend voor hom op die tafel. Hulle trap in die botter en stamp die sout om in hul haas om hul briewe eerste af te lewer.

“Wat nou?” vra Ron verbaas terwyl die hele Griffindor-tafel ooreun om te kyk wat aangaan. Nog sewe uile land langs die eerste klompie en dis omtrent ’n gekrys, gefladder en gehoe-hoe.

“Harry!” sê Hermien uitasem. Sy steek haar hande tussen die klomp uile in en neem ’n lang silindriese pakkie by ’n steenuil. “Ek dink ek weet wat aangaan – maak hierdie een eerste oop!”

Harry skeur die bruin verpakking af. ’n Styf opgerolde eksemplaar van die Maart-uitgawe van *Die Vitter* val uit. Hy vou dit oop en sien sy eie verleë glimlag op die voorblad. Oor die foto staan in groot rooi letters:

HARRY POTTER PRAAT RONDUIT

DIE WAARHEID OOR HY-WAT-NIE-GENOEM-MAG-WORD-NIE
EN DIE NAG TOE EK HOM SIEN TERUGKOM HET

“Dis goed, nè?” sê Mania, wat na die Griffindor-tafel gedryf het en nou op die bank tussen Fred en Ron gaan sit. “Dit het gister uitgekom. Ek het vir my pa gevra om vir jou ’n gratis eksemplaar te stuur. Ek skat dit,” sy beduie na die uile wat nog steeds op die tafel voor Harry rondtrappel, “is briewe van lesers.”

“Dis wat ek ook dink,” sê Hermien in haar skik. “Harry, kan ons maar –?”

“Help julleself,” sê Harry deur die wind.

Ron en Hermien begin dadelik om koeverte oop te skeur.

“Hier’s een van ’n ou wat dink jy’s getik,” sê Ron en loer na die brief. “Ag, nou ja . . .”

“Hierdie vroumens stel voor dat jy ’n kursus Skokpaljasse by Sint Mungo gaan kry,” Hermien frommel die tweede brief teleurgesteld op.

“Hierdie een lyk oukei,” sê Harry terwyl hy ’n brief van ’n heks wat in Paisley woon vlugtig lees. “Haai, sy sê sy glo my!”

“Hierdie een weet nie so lekker nie,” sê Fred, wat ook lustig help briewe oopmaak. “Hy sê jy klink nie mal nie, maar hy wil regtig nie glo dat Jy-Weet-Wie terug is nie en nou weet hy nie wat om te dink nie. Jissie, dat ’n mens perkament so kan mors.”

“Hier’s nog een wat jou glo, Harry!” sê Hermien opgewonde. “Noudat ek jou weergawe gelees het, is ek oortuig dat die Daaglikse Profeet jou baie stief behandel het. . . . Hoewel ek sal verkies om nie te glo

dat Hy-Wat-Nie-Genoem-Mag-Word-Nie terug is, is ek gedwing om te aanvaar dat jy die waarheid praat. O, dis wonderlik!”

“Hier’s nog een wat dink jy’s getik,” sê Ron en gooi ’n opgefrommelde brief oor sy skouer, “maar hierdie een sê jy’t haar oortuig en sy dink jy’s ’n ware held – sy’t selfs ’n foto gestuur – jissou!”

“Wat is hier aan die gang?” vra ’n gemaakte soet stemmetjie.

Harry kyk op, sy hande vol koeverte. Professor Umbridge staan agter Fred en Mania. Haar bultende paddaoë speel oor die versameling uile en briewe op die tafel voor Harry. Die studente agter haar hou hulle gretig dop.

“Waar kom al hierdie briewe vandaan, meneer Potter?” vra sy afgemete.

“Is dit deesdae ’n misdaad?” vra Fred. “Om pos te kry?”

“Oppas, meneer Weasley, of jy kry detensie,” sê Umbridge. “Wel, meneer Potter?”

Harry aarsel, maar hy weet hy sal dit nie kan stil hou nie. Dis net ’n kwessie van tyd voor professor Umbridge *Die Vitter* gaan sien.

“Dis mense wat vir my skryf omdat ek ’n onderhoud toegestaan het,” sê hy. “Oor wat laas jaar in Junie met my gebeur het.”

Hy kyk om een of ander rede na die personeeltafel. Hy het ’n vreemde gevoel dat Dompeldorius ’n oomblik gelede na hom gekyk het, maar die skoolhoof is druk in gesprek met professor Flickerpitt.

“’n Onderhoud?” herhaal Umbridge, haar stem skerper en hoër as gewoonlik. “Wat bedoel jy?”

“Ek bedoel ’n joernalis het vir my vrae gevra en ek het dit beantwoord,” sê Harry. “Hierso –”

Hy skiet sy eksemplaar van *Die Vitter* na haar. Sy vang dit en staar na die voorblad. Haar bleek deeggesig word ’n nare pers kleur.

“Wanneer het jy dit gedoen?” vra sy en haar stem bewe effens.

“Laas naweek in Hogsmeade,” sê Harry.

Die tydskrif skud in haar stomp vingers. Harry kan sien dat sy briesend kwaad is.

“Jy sal nie weer Hogsmeade toe gaan nie, meneer Potter,” fluister sy. “Hoe durf jy . . . hoe kon jy . . .” Sy trek haar asem diep in. “Ek het jou oor en oor probeer leer om nie te lieg nie. Die boodskap het skynbaar nie ingesink nie. Vyftig punte van Griffindor en nog ’n week se detensie.”

Sy stap met lang treë weg. *Die Vitter* is teen haar bors gedruk en talle studente se oë rus op haar.

Teen elfuur is groot kennisgewings oral in die skool opgesit, nie net teen die kennisgewingborde in die huise nie, maar ook in al die klaskamers en gange.

OP LAS VAN DIE HOË ONDERSOEKER VAN HOGWARTS

Alle studente wat in besit van die tydskrif

Die Vitter betrap word, sal geskors word.

Bostaande is in ooreenstemming met

Opvoedkundige Dekreet Nommer Sewe-en-twintig.

Geteken: Dolores Jane Umbridge, Hoë Ondersoeker

Om die een of ander rede straal Hermien van plesier elke keer dat sy een van die kennisgewings sien.

“Wat gaan met jou aan?” vra Harry vir haar.

“Verstaan jy dan nie, Harry?” fluister Hermien. “As daar een ding is wat sy kon doen om te verseker dat absoluut almal in die skool jou onderhoud gaan lees, is dit hierdie verbanning!”

Dit lyk of Hermien heeltemal reg is. Hoewel Harry teen die einde van die dag nog nie eens ’n hoekie van *Die Vitter* iewers in die skool te siene gekry het nie, praat almal oor die onderhoud. Harry hoor hoe die studente in die rye fluister, hulle bespreek dit tydens mid-dagete en tussen die klasse, en volgens Hermien het al die meisies in die kleedkamers daaroor gepraat toe sy voor Antieke Runes daar ingeglip het.

“Almal weet ek ken jou en toe hulle my sien, het hulle my omtrent met vrae bestook,” sê Hermien met blink oë. “En Harry, ek dink hulle glo jou, ek dink regtig so, ek dink jy’t hulle uiteindelik oortuig!”

Intussen sluip Umbridge oral in die skool rond, keer studente voor en eis dat hulle hul sakke en boeke vir haar wys. Harry weet sy is op soek na eksemplare van *Die Vitter*, maar die studente is te uitgeslape vir haar. Die bladsye met Harry se onderhoud is of getoor sodat hulle vir ander mense soos ’n gedeelte uit ’n handboek lyk, of skoongetoor tot dit veilig vir die student is om verder te lees. Kort voor lank het almal in die skool die onderhoud gelees.

Kragtens Opvoedkundige Dekreet Nommer Ses-en-twintig mag die onderwysers natuurlik nie daaroor praat nie, maar hulle vind ander maniere om te wys wat hulle dink. Professor Spruit gee vir Griffindor twintig punte toe Harry vir haar ’n gieter aangee. Aan die einde van Towerspreuke druk ’n stralende professor Flickerpitt ’n doos vol suikermuise in Harry se hande, beduie “Sjuut!” en stap vinnig weg. En tydens Waarsêery begin professor Trelawney histories huil en sê vir die verskrikte klas en ’n afkeurende Umbridge dat Harry inderdaad nie jonk sal sterf nie, maar baie oud gaan word, Minister vir Towerkuns gaan wees en twaalf kinders gaan hê.

Waaroor Harry die blyste is, is toe Cho hom die volgende dag op pad na Transfigurasie inhaal. Voor hy hom kan kry, is haar hand in syne en sê sy by sy oor: "Ek is so jammer. Daardie onderhoud was baie dapper . . . dit het my laat huil."

Harry is jammer om te hoor dat sy weer in trane was, maar baie bly dat hulle weer met mekaar praat en nog blyer toe sy 'n piksoen op sy wang plant voor sy wegdraf.

Nog iets wonderliks gebeur voor die Transfigurasie-klas: Septimus kom uit die ry na hom toe. "Ek wil net sê," brom hy en staar na Harry se linker knie, "dat ek jou glo. En ek het 'n eksemplaar van daardie tydskrif vir my ma gestuur."

Maar Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliath se reaksie plaas die kroon op Harry se triomf. Hy sien hulle later die dag in die biblioteek saam met 'n maer seun wie se naam volgens Hermien Theodore Nott is. Hulle koppe is bymekaar en hulle gluur na Harry wat 'n boek oor Gedeeltelike Verdwynings op die rakke soek. Goliath kraak sy kneukels dreigend en Malfoy fluister iets vir Krabbe. Harry weet goed wat aangaan: hy het in die onderhoud gesê dat hulle pa's Doodseters is.

"En die beste van alles is," sê Hermien in haar skik toe hulle by die biblioteek uitstap, "hulle kan niks sê nie, omdat hulle nie kan erken dat hulle die artikel gelees het nie!"

Aan die etenstafel vertel Mania vir hulle dat *Die Vitter* nog nooit tevore so vinnig uitverkoop het nie.

"My pa moes dit herdruk!" sê sy vir Harry en haar groot oë peul uit van opwindung. "Hy sê dit lyk amper of die mense meer daarin belang stel as in die frommelhoring-snorklappel!"

Daardie aand word Harry soos 'n held in die Griffindor-geselskamer behandel. Fred en George het die voorblad van *Die Vitter* met 'n Vergrootpaljas getoor en dit teen die muur gehang. Harry se reusagtige gesig kyk af na hulle en sê kort-kort iets hardop soos: "DIE MINISTERIE IS MORONE" of "EET MIS, UMBRIDGE". Hermien dink nie dis snaaks nie omdat dit haar konsentrasie versteur. Sy is later so gefrustreerd dat sy vroeg bed toe gaan. Harry moet erken dat die plakkaat ná 'n paar uur nie meer so snaaks is nie, veral nie toe die praatpaljas begin uitwerk en dit later net woorde soos "MIS" en "UMBRIDGE" al vinniger in 'n skril stem skree nie. Dit gee hom 'n hoofpyn en sy litteken begin weer kriewel. Tot die teleurstelling van almal wat om hom saamdrom en hom vir die honderdste keer oor die onderhoud uitvra, sê hy dat hy vroeg wil gaan slaap.

Die slaapsaal is leeg toe hy instap. Hy druk sy voorkop 'n rukkie lank teen die koue ruit langs sy bed. Dit laat sy litteken beter voel.

Toe trek hy uit en klim in die bed. As die hoofpyn net vil weggaan. Hy voel ook effens naar. Hy rol op sy sy, maak sy oë toe en raak amper onmiddellik aan die slaap.

Hy staan in 'n donker vertrek met lang, toegetrekte gordyne wat deur 'n enkele kandelaar vol kerse verlig word. Sy hande is geklem om die stoel voor hom se rugleuning. Sy vingers is lank en wit asof hulle jare laas in die son was. Hulle lyk soos groot heek spinnekoppe teen die stoel se donker fluweel.

Oorkant die stoel, in die poel lig wat die kerse op de vloer gooi, kniel 'n man in 'n swart kleed.

"Dit lyk of ek swak advies ontvang het," sê Harry in 'n hoë, koue stem wat van woede pols.

"Meester, ek smee om vergiffenis," sê die knielende man. Die agterkant van sy kop blink in die kerslig en sy liggaan bewe.

"Ek blameer jou nie, Rookwood," sê Harry in dieselfde koue, wrede stem.

Hy laat los die rugleuning en stap om die stoel sodat hy in die skemer oor die knielende man troon. Dis of hy baie langer as gewoonlik is.

"Is jy seker van jou feite, Rookwood?" vra Harry.

"Ja, my Heer, ja. Ek het immers by die Departement gewerk."

"Avery het my laat verstaan dat Bodus dit sal verwyder."

"Bodus kon dit nie doen nie, Meester. Bodus let geweet hy kan nie, dis hoekom hy so hard teen Malfoy se Imperius-vloek geveg het."

"Staan op, Rookwood," fluister Harry.

Die knielende man verloor amper sy balans in sy haas om Harry te gehoorsaam. Sy gesig is vol pokmerke en die littekens word deur die kerslig beklemtoon. Hy leun vooroor in 'n halwe buiging en loer elke nou en dan verskrik na Harry.

"Jy het die regte ding gedoen toe jy vir my kom sê iet," sê Harry. "Goed. . . dit lyk my ek het maande gemors met 'n vrugtelose soektog. . . maar ons sal van voor af begin. Die heer Woldemort is aan jou dank verskuldig, Rookwood."

"My Heer. . . ja, my Heer," snak Rookwood, sy stem skor van verligting.

"Ek het jou hulp nodig. Jy moet alle moontlike irligting vir my kry."

"Natuurlik, my Heer, natuurlik. . . enigiets. . ."

"Goed dan. . . jy mag gaan. Stuur vir Avery hierheen."

Rookwood skarrel buigend weg en verdwyn deur n deur.

Harry is nou alleen in die donker vertrek. Hy lyk om na die

muur. 'n Ou, gekraakte spieël vol vlekke hang in die skaduwee teen die muur. Harry stap nader. Sy weerkaatsing word al groter en helderder in die donkerte. . . 'n gesig witter as 'n skedel . . . rooi oë met splete vir pupille . . .

“NEEEEEEEEEEE!”

“Wat?” skree 'n stem naby hom.

Harry skop en slaan wild om hom, raak verstrengel in die behangsels en val uit sy bed. Vir 'n paar sekondes weet hy nie waar hy is nie en is hy oortuig dat die skeletagtige wit gesig weer uit die donker voor hom gaan opdoem. Dan hoor hy Ron se stem iewers baie naby aan hom.

“Hou op om soos 'n mal ding te kere te gaan dat ek jou kan loskry!”

Ron pluk die behangsels uit die pad en Harry staar in die maanlig na hom. Hy lê op die naat van sy rug en sy litteken pyn verskriklik. Ron lyk of hy aan 't uittrek was: een arm is buite sy kleed.

“Is iemand weer aangeval?” vra Ron terwyl hy vir Harry op sy voete help. “Is dit my pa? Is dit daardie slang?”

“Nee, almal is oukei. . . ” snak Harry. Dit voel of sy voorkop aan die brand is. “Wel. . . Avery is in die moeilikheid. . . hy't verkeerde inligting gegee. . . Woldemort is woedend. . . ”

Hy kreun en gaan sit bewend op sy bed. Hy vryf oor sy litteken.

“Maar Rookwood gaan hom nou help. . . hy's weer op die regte spoor. . . ”

“Waarvan praat jy?” vra Ron en hy klink bang. “Bedoel jy. . . het jy nou net vir Jy-Weet-Wie gesien?”

“Ek was Jy-Weet-Wie,” sê Harry. Hy strek sy hande voor hom uit om seker te maak hulle is nie meer doodsbleek met lang vingers nie. “Rookwood was by hom, hy's een van die Doodseters wat uit Azkaban ontsnap het, onthou jy? Rookwood het so pas vir hom gesê dat Bodus dit nie kon doen nie.”

“Wat kon doen nie?”

“Iets verwyder. . . hy't gesê Bodus sou geweet het hy kan dit nie doen nie. . . Bodus was onder die Imperius-vloek. . . ek dink hy't gesê Malfoy se pa het dit gedoen.”

“Bodus was getoor om iets te verwyder? Maar – Harry, dit moet. . . ”

“. . . die wapen wees,” voltooi Harry sy sin. “Ek weet.”

Die slaapsaal se deur gaan oop en Dean en Septimus kom in. Harry swaai sy bene op sy bed en leun terug. Hy wil nie hê dit moet lyk of iets vreemds gebeur het so kort nadat Septimus toegegee het dat hy nie mal is nie.

“Het jy gesê jy was Jy-Weet-Wie?” vra Ron baie sag. Sy kop is naby Harry s’n en hy maak of hy vir hom water uit die beker op die bedkassie skink.

“Ja,” sê Harry stil.

Ron neem ’n yslike sluk en Harry sien hoe hy water op sy bors mors.

“Harry,” sê hy terwyl Dean en Septimus raserig regmaak om te gaan slaap, hul klede uittrek en met mekaar gesels, “jy moet vir –”

“Ek hoef vir niemand iets te sê nie,” sê Harry kortaf. “Ek sou niks gesien het as ek Okklumensie kon doen nie. Ek moes al geleer het om hierdie goed uit te sluit. Dis mos wat hulle wil hê.”

Met “hulle” bedoel hy Dompeldorius. Hy klim onder die komberse in en draai sy rug op Ron. Ná ’n rukkie hoor hy Ron se matras kraak toe hy ook gaan lê. Harry se litteken begin weer brand en hy moet hard in sy kussing byt om nie te kreun nie. Iewers, weet hy, word Avery nou gestraf.

Harry en Ron wag tot pouse die volgende dag voor hulle vir Hermien vertel wat gebeur het, want hulle wil doodseker wees dat niemand hulle kan af luister nie. Hulle staan in hul gewone hoek in die koue, winderige binnehof terwyl Harry vir haar alles vertel wat hy van die droom kan onthou. Toe hy klaar is, sê sy eers niks nie, maar staar met ’n gepynigde uitdrukking na Fred en George wat albei koploos is en towerhoede aan die oorkant van die binnehof verkoop.

“Dis dan hoekom hulle hom vermoor het,” sê sy toe sy oplaas wegkyk van Fred en George. “Toe Bodus daardie wapen wou steel, het iets snaaks met hom gebeur. Daar moet verdedigende towerspreuke wees wat keer dat iemand die wapen vat. Dis hoekom hy in Sint Mungo beland het, sy brein was deurmekaar en hy kon nie praat nie. Maar onthou julle wat daardie heler gesê het? Hy was besig om te herstel! En hulle kon nie daardie kans waag nie, kon hulle? Ek bedoel, dalk het die skok van wat ook al gebeur het toe hy aan die wapen raak die Imperius-vloek gekanselleer. En as hy eers weer kon praat, sou hy dalk alles vertel het. Almal sou geweet het hy was gestuur om die wapen te probeer steel. Dit was natuurlik die maklikste ding in die wêreld vir Lucius Malfoy om ’n vloek oor hom uit te spreek. Hy’s gedurig in die Ministerie!”

“Hy was selfs die dag van my verhoor daar,” sê Harry. “In die – wag ’n bietjie . . .” sê hy stadig. “Hy was daardie dag in die Departement vir Geheime se gang! Jou pa het gedink hy’t ondertoe geglip oor my verhoor, maar wat as –”

“Sturgis!” sê Hermien en sy lyk geskok.

“Hoe nou?” sê Ron verwilderd.

“Sturgis Podmore,” sê Hermien uitasem, “is gearresteer omdat hy by daardie deur wou ingaan! Lucius Malfoy het hom ook getoor! Ek wed dit was daardie dag toe jy daar was, Harry. Sturgis het Moodie se onsigbaarheidsmantel gehad, nê? Wat as hy by die deur waggehou het, onsigbaar, en Malfoy het hom hoor beweeg – of geraai daar is iemand – of dalk het hy die Imperius-vloek gebruik net ingeval daar iemand is? Toe Sturgis later ’n kans kry – sê maar toe hy weer moes wagstaan – het hy probeer om by die Departement in te breek om die wapen vir Woldemort – bly stil, Ron! – te steel. Maar hy is gevang en na Azkaban gestuur . . .”

Sy staar na Harry. “En nou het Rookwood vir Woldemort gesê hoe om die wapen te kry?”

“Ek het nie die hele gesprek gehoor nie, maar dit het so geklink. Rookwood het eers daar gewerk . . . dalk sal Woldemort nou vir Rookwood soontoe stuur?”

Hermien knik ingedagte. Toe sê sy skielik: “Jy moes dit nie gesien het nie, Harry.”

“Wat?” sê hy verbaas.

“Jy’s veronderstel om te leer hoe om jou gedagtes vir hierdie soort ding te sluit,” sê Hermien streng.

“Ek weet, maar –”

“Wel, ek dink jy moet probeer vergeet wat jy gesien het,” sê Hermien beslis. “En jy moet in die vervolg harder werk aan Okklumensie.”

Harry is so kwaad dat hy die res van die dag nie met haar praat nie. Dis ’n gruwelike dag. As die studente nie in die gange oor die ontsnapte Doodseters praat nie, lag hulle oor Griffindor se treurige vertoning teen Hoesenproes. Die Slibberins sing “Weasley is ons Koning” tot vervelens toe hard in die gange, tot ’n geïrriteerde Fillis dit teen die aand verbied.

Die week verbeter nie soos dit vorder nie. Harry kry nog twee P’s vir Towerdrankies, hy is nog steeds bekommerd dat Hagrid sy werk gaan verloor en hy dink gereeld aan die droom waarin hy Woldemort was, hoewel hy nie weer met Ron en Hermien daaroor praat nie. Hy wil nie weer deur Hermien aangespreek word nie. Hy wens hy kon met Sirius daaroor praat, maar dis buite die kwessie. Hy besluit dus om dit uit sy gedagtes te weer.

Ongelukkig is sy gedagtes nie meer die veilige plek wat dit voorheen was nie.

“Staan op, Potter.”

'n Paar weke ná sy droom oor Rookwood staan Harry weer op sy knieë in Snerp se kantoor en probeer om sy gedagtes leeg te maak. Hy het nogmaals 'n string ou herinneringe wat hy skaars kan onthou, herleef. Die meeste is vernederende dinge wat Dudley en sy bende op laerskool aan hom gedoen het.

"Daardie laaste herinnering," sê Snerp. "Wat was dit?"

"Ek weet nie," sê Harry moeg terwyl hy opstaan. Dit raak al moeiliker om die herinneringe, wat in 'n warboel van beeld en klank op hom afstorm, van mekaar te skei. "Is dit die een waar my neef my in die toilet probeer laat staan?"

"Nee," sê Snerp sag. "Ek bedoel die een van 'n man wat in die middel van 'n donker vertrek kniel . . ."

"Dis . . . niks," sê Harry.

Snerp se donker oë boor in Harry s'n. Harry onthou dat Snerp gesê het oogkontak is noodsaaklik vir Legilimensie en kyk vinnig weg.

"Hoe het daardie man en daardie vertrek in jou kop gekom, Potter?"

"Dit –" Harry kyk oral behalwe na Snerp. "Dis – net 'n droom wat ek gehad het."

"'n Droom?" herhaal Snerp.

In die stilte wat volg, kyk Harry aandagtig na 'n dooie padda wat in 'n fles pers vloeistof dryf.

"Jy weet hoekom jy hier is, nè, Potter?" sê Snerp in 'n dreigende stem. "Jy weet hoekom ek my aande vir hierdie vervelike taak opoffer?"

"Ja," sê Harry styl.

"Herinner my hoekom ons hier is, Potter."

"Sodat ek Okklumensie kan leer." Harry staar nou na 'n dooie paling.

"Korrek, Potter. En ek sou verwag dat selfs iemand so onnosel soos jy –" Harry gluur venynig na Snerp, "ná twee maande 'n bietjie vordering sou toon. Hoeveel ander drome oor die Donker Heer het jy gehad?"

"Net daardie een," lieg Harry.

"Dalk," sê Snerp en sy koue oë vernou effens, "dalk geniet jy hierdie gesigte en drome, Potter. Dalk laat hulle jou spesiaal voel – belangrik?"

"Nee, hulle laat nie," sê Harry deur stram kake en sy vingers klem om sy towerstaf.

"Ek is bly om dit te hoor, Potter," sê Snerp koud, "want jy is nie spesiaal of belangrik nie, en dis nie jou taak om uit te vind wat die

Donker Heer vir sy Doodseters sê nie."

"Nee – dis joune, nè?" snou Harry.

Hy was nie van plan om dit te sê nie, maar die woorde het in 'n woedebui uit hom gebars. Hulle staan 'n lang oomblik na mekaar en Harry is oortuig dat hy te ver gegaan het. Maar daar is 'n vreemde, amper tevrede uitdrukking op Snerp se gesig toe hy met glinsterende oë sê: "Ja, Potter, dis my werk. As jy gereed is, kan ons weer begin."

Hy lig sy towerstaf. "Een – twee – drie – *Legilimens!*"

'n Honderd Dementors swiep oor die meer na Harry. hy vertrek sy gesig in konsentrasie. hulle kom al nader. hy kan die donker ooggate onder hul kappe sien. maar hy kan ook vir Snerp voor hom sien staan, sy oë vasgenaël op Harry se gesig terwyl hy binnensmonds prewel. dan word Snerp al duideliker en die Dementors al dowwer.

Harry lig sy towerstaf.

"*Protego!*"

Snerp steier – sy towerstaf vlieg deur die lug, weg van Harry af – en skielik wemel Harry se brein van herinneringe wat nie syne is nie: 'n haakneusman wat op 'n ineengekrimpde vrou skree terwyl 'n klein donkerkopseuntjie in 'n hoek sit en huil. 'n tiener met vetterige hare wat alleen in 'n skemer slaapkamer sit en met sy towerstaf na vlieg teen die plafon skiet. 'n meisie wat lag terwyl 'n maer seun sukkel om op 'n bokspringende besem te klim –

"GENOEG!"

Harry voel asof iemand hom hard teen die bors geslaan het. Hy steier 'n paar tree terug, tref 'n rak teen Snerp se muur en hoor iets kraak. Snerp bewe effens en sy gesig is spierwit.

Die agterkant van Harry se kleed is nat. Een van die flesse agter hom het gekraak toe hy daarteen val en die slymerige gepiekelde ding binne-in draai in die rondte terwyl die vloeistof uit die fles syfer.

"*Reparo!*" sis Snerp en die fles verseël vanself. "Wel, Potter . . . dit was beslis 'n verbetering . . ." Hy hyg effens terwyl hy die Peinssif regstoot waarin hy voor die les sy gedagtes gebêre het, amper asof hy wil seker maak dat hulle nog daarin is. "Ek kan nie onthou dat ek vir jou gesê het om 'n Skildspreuk te gebruik nie, maar dit was beslis effektief . . ."

Harry antwoord nie. Hy kan aanvoel dat enigiets wat hy sê gevaarlik kan wees. Hy is seker hy het Snerp se herinneringe so pas binnegedring, dat hy tonele uit Snerp se kinderjare gesien het. Dis ontsenuend om te dink dat die huilende seuntjie met die bakleiende

ouers nou hier voor hom staan, sy oë vol wrewel.

“Sal ons weer probeer?” vra Snerp.

’n Siddering van angs gaan deur Harry. Hy weet hy gaan betaal vir wat so pas gebeur het. Hulle neem stelling in, die lessenaar tussen hulle. Harry besef dit gaan hierdie keer baie moeiliker wees om sy gedagtes leeg te maak.

“Ek tel drie,” sê Snerp en lig weer sy towerstaf. “Een – twee – ”

Harry het nie genoeg tyd om hom reg te ruk voor Snerp hard “Legilimens!” skree nie.

Hy hardloop in die gang af na die Departement vir Geheime, verby die kaal klipmure, verby die fakkels – die swart deur word groter, hy hardloop so vinnig dat hy daarteen gaan bots, hy is enkele tree daarvandaan, hy sien weer die skreef blou lig –

Die deur vlieg oop! Hy is uiteindelik binne – in ’n ronde vertrek met swart mure en ’n swart vloer wat deur kerse met blou vlamme verlig word. Daar is nog deure om hom – hy moet ingaan – maar watter deur moet hy oopmaak –?

“POTTER!”

Harry se oë gaan oop. Hy lê weer plat op sy rug sonder dat hy weet hoe dit gebeur het. Hy hyg na asem asof hy werklik die volle lengte van die gang in die Departement vir Geheime gehardloop het, werklik deur die swart deur by die ronde vertrek ingestorm het.

“Wat doen jy?” Snerp troon woedend oor hom.

“Ek . . . weet nie wat aangaan nie,” sê Harry eerlik toe hy orent kom. Daar is ’n knop waar sy agterkop die vloer getref het en hy voel koorsig. “Ek het dit nog nooit vantevore gesien nie. Ek bedoel, ek het al van die deur gedroom . . . maar dit was nog nooit oop nie . . . ”

“Jy werk nie hard genoeg nie!”

Om die een of ander rede is Snerp selfs kwater as toe Harry sy herinneringe gesien het.

“Jy is lui en agtelosig, Potter. Dis ’n wonder dat die Donker Heer – ”

“Mag ek iets vra, meneer?” sê Harry, wat nou ook kwaad is. “Hoe kom noem jy vir Woldemort die Donker Heer? Sover ek weet, is dit net Doodseters wat hom so noem.”

Snerp se mond gaan smalend oop – net toe ’n vrou iewers buite skree.

Snerp se kop ruk op. Hy staar na die plafon.

“Wat de –?” prewel hy.

Harry hoor ’n gedempte geraas wat klink of dit uit die ingangsportaal kom. Snerp kyk fronsend na hom.

“Het jy iets ongewoons gesien toe jy hierheen gekom het, Potter?”

Harry skud sy kop. lewers bokant hulle skree die vrou weer. Snerp stap na sy kantoor se deur, sy towerstaf nog steeds gereed voor hom, en swiep uit. Harry aarsel 'n oomblik voor hy hom volg.

Die krete kom inderdaad uit die ingangsportaal. Dit word harder soos Harry na die kliptrappe hardloop wat uit die kerkers opkom. Toe hy bo kom, is die ingangsportaal vol mense. Studente stroom uit die Groot Saal waar aandete nog bedien word om te sien wat aangaan, en drom op die marmertrappe saam. Harry druk deur 'n groep lang Slibberins en sien dat die mense 'n groot kring gevorm het. Party lyk geskok en ander lyk bang. Professor McGonagall staan regoor Harry aan die oorkant van die saal. Dit lyk of dit wat sy sien haar siek laat voel.

Professor Trelawney staan in die middel van die ingangsportaal. Sy het haar towerstaf in een hand en 'n lee sjerriebottel in die ander. Sy lyk heeltemal mal. Haar hare staan wild, haar bril sit skeef sodat een oog groter as die ander een lyk en haar talle sjaals en serpe sleep slordig van haar skouers af. Dit lyk of sy letterlik uitrafel. Twee groot trommels staan op die vloer langs haar, een is onderstebo asof dit met die trappe afgeslinger is. Sy staar, skynbaar doodverskrik, na iets wat Harry nie kan sien nie, maar wat aan die voet van die trappe moet wees.

"Nee!" skree professor Trelawney. "NEE! Dit kan nie gebeur nie. Dit kan nie... ek weier om dit te aanvaar!"

"Jy't dit nie verwag nie?" vra 'n hoë dogtertjiesem geniepsig en duidelik geamuseerd. Harry beweeg effens na regs en sien Trelawney se vreesaanjaende visioen: professor Umbridge. "Jy kan inderdaad nie eens môre se weer voorspel nie, maar jy moes darem seker besef het dat iemand wat so pateties klas gee en ook glad nie verbeter nie, haar werk sal verloor?"

"Jy k-kan nie!" skreeu professor Trelawney en die trane stroom van agter haar brillense oor haar gesig. "jy k-kan my nie afdank nie! Ek's al s-sestien jaar hier! H-Hogwarts is my t-tuiste!"

"Dit was jou tuiste," sê professor Umbridge. Harry voel gewalg deur die genot op haar paddagesig terwyl sy kyk hoe professor Trelawney snikkend op een van haar trommels neersak. "Dit was tot 'n halfuur gelede, toe die Minister vir Towerkuns jou ontslagbrief geteken het. Verwyder jouself uit die portaal. Jy's 'n verleentheid vir almal."

Maar dis duidelik dat sy dit geniet om te sien hoe professor Trelawney sidderend vorentoe en agtertoe oor haar trommel wieg. Harry hoor gesmoorde snikke links van hom en kyk om. Hildegard en Parvati staan in mekaar se arms en huil. Dan hoor hy voetstappe.

Professor McGonagall is besig om tussen die studente deur na professor Trelawney te stap. Sy vat haar aan die skouer en haal 'n groot sakdoek uit haar kleet.

"Toe nou, Sybill, bedaar . . . snuit jou neus . . . dis nie so erg soos jy dink nie, jy gaan Hogwarts nie verlaat nie . . ."

"O, nogal, professor McGonagall?" sê Umbridge in 'n dodelike stem. Sy gee 'n paar tree nader. "En wie gee jou die reg om daardie stelling te maak . . .?"

"Dit sal ek wees," sê 'n diep stem.

Die eikehoutdeure het oopgeswaai. Studente gee vinnig pad toe Dompeldorius in die portaal verskyn. Harry weet nie wat hy buite op die terrein gemaak het nie, maar hy lyk besonder indrukwekkend in die groot kosyn met die mistige naglug agter hom. Hy los die deure oop en stap deur die kring mense wat om professor Trelawney staan. Sy hang nog steeds betraand en bewerig oor haar trommel en professor McGonagall staan langs haar.

"Jy, professor Dompeldorius?" Umbridge lag onplesierig. "Ek is bevrees jy verstaan nie die situasie nie. Ek het hier –" sy haal 'n rol perkament uit haar kleet – 'n ontslagbrief wat deur my en die Minister vir Towerkuns onderteken is. Volgens Opvoedkundige Dekreet Nommer Drie-en-twintig het die Hoë Ondersoeker van Hogwarts die mag om enige onderwyser te inspekteer, op proef te plaas en te ontslaan indien sy – dis te sê, ek – voel dat die onderwyser nie voldoen aan die standarde soos gestel deur die Ministerie vir Towerkuns nie. Ek het besluit dat professor Trelawney nie op standaard is nie. En ek het haar ontslaan."

Tot Harry se verbasing hou Dompeldorius se glimlag nie op nie. Hy kyk af na professor Trelawney wat nog steeds snikkend oor haar trommel hang en sê: "Jy's natuurlik heeltemal reg, professor Umbridge. As Hoë Ondersoeker het jy die reg om my onderwysers te ontslaan. Jy het egter nie die reg om hulle uit die kasteel te jaag nie. Ek is bevrees," hy maak 'n hoflike buiginkie, "daardie mag berus nog steeds by die skoolhoof. En dis my wens dat professor Trelawney in Hogwarts aanbly."

Toe sy dit hoor, begin professor Trelawney wild lag en sy hik effens.

"Nee – nee, ek sal g-gaan, Dompeldorius! Ek s-sal Hogwarts verlaat en my f-fortuin elders soek –"

"Nee," sê Dompeldorius skerp. "Dis my wens dat jy hier bly, Sybill."

Hy kyk na professor McGonagall.

"Sal jy vir Sybill boontoe vergesel, professor McGonagall?"

"Natuurlik," sê McGonagall. "Kom, Sybill, staan op."

Professor Spruit draf haastig nader en gryp professor Trelawney se ander arm. Hulle help haar verby Umbridge met die marmertrappe op. Professor Flickerpitt skarrel ook nader, sy towerstaf uitgestrek voor hom. Hy piep "*Locomotor trommels!*" en professor Trelawney se bagaste styg op en volg haar met die trappe op en professor Flickerpitt agterna.

Professor Umbridge staan stokstil en gluur na Dompeldorius, wat nog altyd vriendelik glimlag.

"En wat," sê sy in 'n fluisterstem wat almal in die portaal kan hoor, "gaan jy maak wanneer ek 'n nuwe onderwyser in haar plek aanstel wat haar kamer moet kry?"

"O, maar jy hoef jou nie daaroor te bekommer nie," sê Dompeldorius plesierig. "Jy sien, ek het reeds 'n nuwe onderwyser vir Waarsêery gevind, en hy verkies die grondverdieping."

"Jy het?" sê Umbridge skril. "Jy het gevind? Mag ek jou daaraan herinner, Dompeldorius, dat ingevolge Opvoedkundige Dekreet Nommer Twee-en-twintig –"

"Het die Ministerie die reg om 'n geskikte kandidaat aan te stel indien – en slegs indien – die skoolhoof nie iemand kon vind nie," sê Dompeldorius. "En ek is bly om te kan sê dat ek wel daarin kon slaag. Mag ek julle voorstel?"

Hy draai na die oop deure waardeur die aandmis na binne sweef. Harry hoor hoewe klap. Daar is 'n geskokte gemompel in die portaal en die studente naby die deure gee vinnig pad. Party val oor hul voete in hul haas om uit die aankomeling se pad te kom.

'n Gesig verskyn in die mis. Een wat Harry vroeër al tydens 'n donker en gevaarlike nag in die Verbode Woud gesien het: wit-blonde hare en priemende blou oë, die kop en bolyf van 'n man en die onderlyf van 'n perd.

"Dis Firenze," sê Dompeldorius in sy noppies vir die geskokte Umbridge. "Jy sal vind dat hy uiters geskik is."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



THE CENTAUR AND THE SNEAK

I'll bet you wish you hadn't given up Divination now, don't you, Hermione?" asked Parvati, smirking.

It was breakfast time a few days after the sacking of Professor Trelawney, and Parvati was curling her eyelashes around her wand and examining the effect in the back of her spoon. They were to have their first lesson with Firenze that morning.

"Not really," said Hermione indifferently, who was reading the *Daily Prophet*. "I've never really liked horses."

She turned a page of the newspaper, scanning its columns.

“He’s not a horse, he’s a centaur!” said Lavender, sounding shocked.

“A *gorgeous* centaur . . .” sighed Parvati.

“Either way, he’s still got four legs,” said Hermione coolly. “Anyway, I thought you two were all upset that Trelawney had gone?”

“We are!” Lavender assured her. “We went up to her office to see her, we took her some daffodils — not the honking ones that Sprout’s got, nice ones . . .”

“How is she?” asked Harry.

“Not very good, poor thing,” said Lavender sympathetically. “She was crying and saying she’d rather leave the castle forever than stay here if Umbridge is still here, and I don’t blame her. Umbridge was horrible to her, wasn’t she?”

“I’ve got a feeling Umbridge has only just started being horrible,” said Hermione darkly.

“Impossible,” said Ron, who was tucking into a large plate of eggs and bacon. “She can’t get any worse than she’s been already.”

“You mark my words, she’s going to want revenge on Dumbledore for appointing a new teacher without consulting her,” said Hermione, closing the newspaper. “Especially another part-human. You saw the look on her face when she saw Firenze . . .”

After breakfast Hermione departed for her Arithmancy class and Harry and Ron followed Parvati and Lavender into the entrance hall, heading for Divination.

“Aren’t we going up to North Tower?” asked Ron, looking puzzled, as Parvati bypassed the marble staircase.

Parvati looked scornfully over her shoulder at him.

“How d’you expect Firenze to climb that ladder? We’re in classroom eleven now, it was on the notice board yesterday.”

Classroom eleven was situated in the ground-floor corridor leading off the entrance hall on the opposite side to the Great Hall. Harry knew it to be one of those classrooms that were never used regularly, and that it therefore had the slightly neglected feeling of a cupboard or storeroom. When he entered it right behind Ron, and found himself right in the middle of a forest clearing, he was therefore momentarily stunned.

“What the — ?”

The classroom floor had become springily mossy and trees were growing out of it; their leafy branches fanned across the ceiling and windows, so that the room was full of slanting shafts of soft, dappled, green light. The students who had already arrived were sitting on the earthy floor with their backs resting against tree trunks or boulders, arms wrapped around their knees or folded tightly across their chests, looking rather nervous. In the middle of the room, where there were no trees, stood Firenze.

“Harry Potter,” he said, holding out a hand when Harry entered.

“Er — hi,” said Harry, shaking hands with the centaur, who surveyed him unblinkingly through those astonishingly blue eyes but did not smile. “Er — good to see you . . .”

“And you,” said the centaur, inclining his white-blond head. “It was foretold that we would meet again.”

Harry noticed that there was the shadow of a hoof-shaped bruise on Firenze’s chest. As he turned to join the rest of the class upon the

floor, he saw that they were all looking at him with awe, apparently deeply impressed that he was on speaking terms with Firenze, whom they seemed to find intimidating.

When the door was closed and the last student had sat down upon a tree stump beside the wastepaper basket, Firenze gestured around the room.

“Professor Dumbledore has kindly arranged this classroom for us,” said Firenze, when everyone had settled down, “in imitation of my natural habitat. I would have preferred to teach you in the Forbidden Forest, which was — until Monday — my home . . . but this is not possible.”

“Please — er — sir —” said Parvati breathlessly, raising her hand, “why not? We’ve been in there with Hagrid, we’re not frightened!”

“It is not a question of your bravery,” said Firenze, “but of my position. I can no longer return to the forest. My herd has banished me.”

“Herd?” said Lavender in a confused voice, and Harry knew she was thinking of cows. “What — oh!” Comprehension dawned on her face. “There are *more of you*?” she said, stunned.

“Did Hagrid breed you, like the thestrals?” asked Dean eagerly.

Firenze turned his head very slowly to face Dean, who seemed to realize at once that he had said something very offensive.

“I didn’t — I meant — sorry,” he finished in a hushed voice.

“Centaurus are not the servants or playthings of humans,” said Firenze quietly. There was a pause, then Parvati raised her hand again.

“Please, sir . . . why have the other centaurs banished you?”

“Because I have agreed to work for Professor Dumbledore,” said Firenze. “They see this as a betrayal of our kind.”

Harry remembered how, nearly four years ago, the centaur Bane had shouted at Firenze for allowing Harry to ride to safety upon his back, calling him a “common mule.” He wondered whether it had been Bane who had kicked Firenze in the chest.

“Let us begin,” said Firenze. He swished his long palomino tail, raised his hand toward the leafy canopy overhead then lowered it slowly, and as he did so, the light in the room dimmed, so that they now seemed to be sitting in a forest clearing by twilight, and stars emerged upon the ceiling. There were *oohs* and gasps, and Ron said audibly, “Blimey!”

“Lie back upon the floor,” said Firenze in his calm voice, “and observe the heavens. Here is written, for those who can see, the fortune of our races.”

Harry stretched out on his back and gazed upward at the ceiling. A twinkling red star winked at him from overhead.

“I know that you have learned the names of the planets and their moons in Astronomy,” said Firenze’s calm voice, “and that you have mapped the stars’ progress through the heavens. Centaurs have unraveled the mysteries of these movements over centuries. Our findings teach us that the future may be glimpsed in the sky above us . . .”

“Professor Trelawney did Astrology with us!” said Parvati excitedly, raising her hand in front of her so that it stuck up in the air as she lay on her back. “Mars causes accidents and burns and things

like that, and when it makes an angle to Saturn, like now" — she drew a right angle in the air above her — "that means that people need to be extra careful when handling hot things —"

"That," said Firenze calmly, "is human nonsense."

Parvati's hand fell limply to her side.

"Trivial hurts, tiny human accidents," said Firenze, as his hooves thudded over the mossy floor. "These are of no more significance than the scurryings of ants to the wide universe, and are unaffected by planetary movements."

"Professor Trelawney —" began Parvati, in a hurt and indignant voice.

"— is a human," said Firenze simply. "And is therefore blinkered and fettered by the limitations of your kind."

Harry turned his head very slightly to look at Parvati. She looked very offended, as did several of the people surrounding her.

"Sybill Trelawney may have Seen, I do not know," continued Firenze, and Harry heard the swishing of his tail again as he walked up and down before them, "but she wastes her time, in the main, on the self-flattering nonsense humans call fortune-telling. I, however, am here to explain the wisdom of centaurs, which is impersonal and impartial. We watch the skies for the great tides of evil or change that are sometimes marked there. It may take ten years to be sure of what we are seeing."

Firenze pointed to the red star directly above Harry.

"In the past decade, the indications have been that Wizard-kind is living through nothing more than a brief calm between two wars. Mars, bringer of battle, shines brightly above us, suggesting that the

fight must break out again soon. How soon, centaurs may attempt to divine by the burning of certain herbs and leaves, by the observation of fume and flame . . .”

It was the most unusual lesson Harry had ever attended. They did indeed burn sage and mallowsweet there on the classroom floor, and Firenze told them to look for certain shapes and symbols in the pungent fumes, but he seemed perfectly unconcerned that not one of them could see any of the signs he described, telling them that humans were hardly ever good at this, that it took centaurs years and years to become competent, and finished by telling them that it was foolish to put too much faith in such things anyway, because even centaurs sometimes read them wrongly. He was nothing like any human teacher Harry had ever had. His priority did not seem to be to teach them what he knew, but rather to impress upon them that nothing, not even centaurs’ knowledge, was foolproof.

“He’s not very definite on anything, is he?” said Ron in a low voice, as they put out their mallowsweet fire. “I mean, I could do with a few more details about this war we’re about to have, couldn’t you?”

The bell rang right outside the classroom door and everyone jumped; Harry had completely forgotten that they were still inside the castle, quite convinced that he was really in the forest. The class filed out, looking slightly perplexed; Harry and Ron were on the point of following them when Firenze called, “Harry Potter, a word, please.”

Harry turned. The centaur advanced a little toward him. Ron hesitated.

“You may stay,” Firenze told him. “But close the door, please.”

Ron hastened to obey.

“Harry Potter, you are a friend of Hagrid’s, are you not?” said the centaur.

“Yes,” said Harry.

“Then give him a warning from me. His attempt is not working. He would do better to abandon it.”

“His attempt is not working?” Harry repeated blankly.

“And he would do better to abandon it,” said Firenze, nodding. “I would warn Hagrid myself, but I am banished — it would be unwise for me to go too near the forest now — Hagrid has troubles enough, without a centaurs’ battle.”

“But — what’s Hagrid attempting to do?” said Harry nervously.

Firenze looked at Harry impassively.

“Hagrid has recently rendered me a great service,” said Firenze, “and he has long since earned my respect for the care he shows all living creatures. I shall not betray his secret. But he must be brought to his senses. The attempt is not working. Tell him, Harry Potter. Good day to you.”

The happiness Harry had felt in the aftermath of *The Quibbler* interview had long since evaporated. As a dull March blurred into a squally April, his life seemed to have become one long series of worries and problems again.

Umbridge had continued attending all Care of Magical Creatures lessons, so it had been very difficult to deliver Firenze’s warning to

Hagrid. At last Harry had managed it by pretending he had lost his copy of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and doubling back after class one day. When he passed on Firenze's message, Hagrid gazed at him for a moment through his puffy, blackened eyes, apparently taken aback. Then he seemed to pull himself together.

"Nice bloke, Firenze," he said gruffly, "but he don' know what he's talkin' about on this. The attemp's comin' on fine."

"Hagrid, what're you up to?" asked Harry seriously. "Because you've got to be careful, Umbridge has already sacked Trelawney and if you ask me, she's on a roll. If you're doing anything you shouldn't be —"

"There's things more importan' than keepin' a job," said Hagrid, though his hands shook slightly as he said this and a basin full of knarl droppings crashed to the floor. "Don' worry about me, Harry, jus' get along now, there's a good lad . . ."

Harry had no choice but to leave Hagrid mopping up the dung all over his floor, but he felt thoroughly dispirited as he trudged back up to the castle.

Meanwhile, as the teachers and Hermione persisted in reminding them, the O.W.L.s were drawing ever nearer. All the fifth years were suffering from stress to some degree, but Hannah Abbott became the first to receive a Calming Draught from Madam Pomfrey after she burst into tears during Herbology and sobbed that she was too stupid to take exams and wanted to leave school now.

If it had not been for the D.A. lessons, Harry thought he would have been extremely unhappy. He sometimes felt that he was living for the hours he spent in the Room of Requirement, working hard but

thoroughly enjoying himself at the same time, swelling with pride as he looked around at his fellow D.A. members and saw how far they had come. Indeed, Harry sometimes wondered how Umbridge was going to react when all the members of the D.A. received “Outstanding” in their Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L.s.

They had finally started work on Patronuses, which everybody had been very keen to practice, though as Harry kept reminding them, producing a Patronus in the middle of a brightly lit classroom when they were not under threat was very different to producing it when confronted by something like a dementor.

“Oh, don’t be such a killjoy,” said Cho brightly, watching her silvery swan-shaped Patronus soar around the Room of Requirement during their last lesson before Easter. “They’re so pretty!”

“They’re not supposed to be pretty, they’re supposed to protect you,” said Harry patiently. “What we really need is a boggart or something, that’s how I learned, I had to conjure a Patronus while the boggart was pretending to be a dementor —”

“But that would be really scary!” said Lavender, who was shooting puffs of silver vapor out of the end of her wand. “And I still — can’t — do it!” she added angrily.

Neville was having trouble too. His face was screwed up in concentration, but only feeble wisps of silver smoke issued from his wand-tip.

“You’ve got to think of something happy,” Harry reminded him.

“I’m trying,” said Neville miserably, who was trying so hard his round face was actually shining with sweat.

“Harry, I think I’m doing it!” yelled Seamus, who had been brought

along to his first ever D.A. meeting by Dean. "Look — ah — it's gone. . . . But it was definitely something hairy, Harry!"

Hermione's Patronus, a shining silver otter, was gamboling around her.

"They *are* sort of nice, aren't they?" she said, looking at it fondly.

The door of the Room of Requirement opened and then closed again; Harry looked around to see who had entered, but there did not seem to be anybody there. It was a few moments before he realized that the people close to the door had fallen silent. Next thing he knew, something was tugging at his robes somewhere near the knee. He looked down and saw, to his very great astonishment, Dobby the house-elf peering up at him from beneath his usual eight hats.

"Hi, Dobby!" he said. "What are you — what's wrong?"

For the elf's eyes were wide with terror and he was shaking. The members of the D.A. closest to Harry had fallen silent now. Everybody in the room was watching Dobby. The few Patronuses people had managed to conjure faded away into silver mist, leaving the room looking much darker than before.

"Harry Potter, sir . . ." squeaked the elf, trembling from head to foot, "Harry Potter, sir . . . Dobby has come to warn you . . . but the house-elves have been warned not to tell . . ."

He ran headfirst at the wall. Harry, who had some experience of Dobby's habits of self-punishment, made to seize him, but Dobby merely bounced off the stone, cushioned by his eight hats. Hermione and a few of the other girls let out squeaks of fear and sympathy.

"What's happened, Dobby?" Harry asked, grabbing the elf's tiny arm and holding him away from anything with which he might seek to

hurt himself.

“Harry Potter . . . she . . . she . . .”

Dobby hit himself hard on the nose with his free fist. Harry seized that too.

“Who’s ‘she,’ Dobby?”

But he thought he knew — surely only one “she” could induce such fear in Dobby? The elf looked up at him, slightly cross-eyed, and mouthed wordlessly.

“Umbridge?” asked Harry, horrified.

Dobby nodded, then tried to bang his head off Harry’s knees; Harry held him at bay.

“What about her? Dobby — she hasn’t found out about this — about us — about the D.A.?”

He read the answer in the elf’s stricken face. His hands held fast by Harry, the elf tried to kick himself and sank to his knees.

“Is she coming?” Harry asked quietly.

Dobby let out a howl. “Yes, Harry Potter, yes!”

Harry straightened up and looked around at the motionless, terrified people gazing at the thrashing elf.

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?” Harry bellowed. “RUN!”

They all pelted toward the exit at once, forming a scrum at the door; then people burst through, Harry could hear them sprinting along the corridors and hoped they had the sense not to try and make it all the way to their dormitories. It was only ten to nine, if they just took refuge in the library or the Owlery, which were both nearer —

“Harry, come on!” shrieked Hermione from the center of the knot

of people now fighting to get out.

He scooped up Dobby, who was still attempting to do himself serious injury, and ran with the elf in his arms to join the back of the queue.

“Dobby — this is an order — get back down to the kitchen with the other elves, and if she asks you whether you warned me, lie and say no!” said Harry. “And I forbid you to hurt yourself!” he added, dropping the elf as he made it over the threshold at last and slamming the door behind him.

“Thank you, Harry Potter!” squeaked Dobby, and he streaked off. Harry glanced left and right, the others were all moving so fast that he caught only glimpses of flying heels at either end of the corridor before they vanished. He started to run right; there was a boys’ bathroom up ahead; he could pretend he’d been in there all the time if he could just reach it —

“AAARGH!”

Something caught him around the ankles and he fell spectacularly, skidding along on his front for six feet before coming to a halt. Someone behind him was laughing. He rolled over onto his back and saw Malfoy concealed in a niche beneath an ugly dragon-shaped vase.

“Trip Jinx, Potter!” he said. “Hey, Professor — PROFESSOR! I’ve got one!”

Umbridge came bustling around the far corner, breathless but wearing a delighted smile.

“It’s him!” she said jubilantly at the sight of Harry on the floor. “Excellent, Draco, excellent, oh, very good — fifty points to

Slytherin! I'll take him from here. . . . Stand up, Potter!"

Harry got to his feet, glaring at the pair of them. He had never seen Umbridge looking so happy. She seized his arm in a vicelike grip and turned, beaming broadly, to Malfoy. "You hop along and see if you can round up anymore of them, Draco," she said. "Tell the others to look in the library — anybody out of breath — check the bathrooms, Miss Parkinson can do the girls' ones — off you go — and you," she added in her softest, most dangerous voice, as Malfoy walked away. "You can come with me to the headmaster's office, Potter."

They were at the stone gargoyle within minutes. Harry wondered how many of the others had been caught. He thought of Ron — Mrs. Weasley would kill him — and of how Hermione would feel if she was expelled before she could take her O.W.L.s. And it had been Seamus's very first meeting . . . and Neville had been getting so good. . . .

"Fizzing Whizbee," sang Umbridge, and the stone gargoyle jumped aside, the wall behind split open, and they ascended the moving stone staircase. They reached the polished door with the griffin knocker, but Umbridge did not bother to knock, she strode straight inside, still holding tight to Harry.

The office was full of people. Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, his expression serene, the tips of his long fingers together. Professor McGonagall stood rigidly beside him, her face extremely tense. Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, was rocking backward and forward on his toes beside the fire, apparently immensely pleased with the situation. Kingsley Shacklebolt and a tough-looking wizard Harry did not recognize with very short, wiry hair were

positioned on either side of the door like guards, and the freckled, bespectacled form of Percy Weasley hovered excitedly beside the wall, a quill and a heavy scroll of parchment in his hands, apparently poised to take notes.

The portraits of old headmasters and mistresses were not shamming sleep tonight. All of them were watching what was happening below, alert and serious. As Harry entered, a few flitted into neighboring frames and whispered urgently into their neighbors' ears.

Harry pulled himself free of Umbridge's grasp as the door swung shut behind them. Cornelius Fudge was glaring at him with a kind of vicious satisfaction upon his face.

"Well," he said. "Well, well, well . . ."

Harry replied with the dirtiest look he could muster. His heart drummed madly inside him, but his brain was oddly cool and clear.

"He was heading back to Gryffindor Tower," said Umbridge. There was an indecent excitement in her voice, the same callous pleasure Harry had heard as she watched Professor Trelawney dissolving with misery in the entrance hall. "The Malfoy boy cornered him."

"Did he, did he?" said Fudge appreciatively. "I must remember to tell Lucius. Well, Potter . . . I expect you know why you are here?"

Harry fully intended to respond with a defiant "yes": His mouth had opened and the word was half formed when he caught sight of Dumbledore's face. Dumbledore was not looking directly at Harry; his eyes were fixed upon a point just over his shoulder, but as Harry stared at him, he shook his head a fraction of an inch to each side.

Harry changed direction mid-word.

“Yeh — no.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Fudge.

“No,” said Harry, firmly.

“You *don't* know why you are here?”

“No, I don't,” said Harry.

Fudge looked incredulously from Harry to Professor Umbridge; Harry took advantage of his momentary inattention to steal another quick look at Dumbledore, who gave the carpet the tiniest of nods and the shadow of a wink.

“So you have no idea,” said Fudge in a voice positively sagging with sarcasm, “why Professor Umbridge has brought you to this office? You are not aware that you have broken any school rules?”

“School rules?” said Harry. “No.”

“Or Ministry decrees?” amended Fudge angrily.

“Not that I'm aware of,” said Harry blandly.

His heart was still hammering very fast. It was almost worth telling these lies to watch Fudge's blood pressure rising, but he could not see how on earth he would get away with them. If somebody had tipped off Umbridge about the D.A. then he, the leader, might as well be packing his trunk right now.

“So it's news to you, is it,” said Fudge, his voice now thick with anger, “that an illegal student organization has been discovered within this school?”

“Yes, it is,” said Harry, hoisting an unconvincing look of innocent surprise onto his face.

"I think, Minister," said Umbridge silkily from beside him, "we might make better progress if I fetch our informant."

"Yes, yes, do," said Fudge, nodding, and he glanced maliciously at Dumbledore as Umbridge left the room. "There's nothing like a good witness, is there, Dumbledore?"

"Nothing at all, Cornelius," said Dumbledore gravely, inclining his head.

There was a wait of several minutes, in which nobody looked at each other, then Harry heard the door open behind him. Umbridge moved past him into the room, gripping by the shoulder Cho's curly-haired friend Marietta, who was hiding her face in her hands.

"Don't be scared, dear, don't be frightened," said Professor Umbridge softly, patting her on the back, "it's quite all right, now. You have done the right thing. The Minister is very pleased with you. He'll be telling your mother what a good girl you've been. Marietta's mother, Minister," she added, looking up at Fudge, "is Madam Edgecombe from the Department of Magical Transportation. Floo Network office — she's been helping us police the Hogwarts fires, you know."

"Jolly good, jolly good!" said Fudge heartily. "Like mother, like daughter, eh? Well, come on, now, dear, look up, don't be shy, let's hear what you've got to — galloping gargoyles!"

As Marietta raised her head, Fudge leapt backward in shock, nearly landing himself in the fire. He cursed and stamped on the hem of his cloak, which had started to smoke, and Marietta gave a wail and pulled the neck of her robes right up to her eyes, but not before the whole room had seen that her face was horribly disfigured by a

series of close-set purple pustules that had spread across her nose and cheeks to form the word "SNEAK."

"Never mind the spots now, dear," said Umbridge impatiently, "just take your robes away from your mouth and tell the Minister —"

But Marietta gave another muffled wail and shook her head frantically.

"Oh, very well, you silly girl, *I'll* tell him," snapped Umbridge. She hitched her sickly smile back onto her face and said, "Well, Minister, Miss Edgecombe here came to my office shortly after dinner this evening and told me she had something she wanted to tell me. She said that if I proceeded to a secret room on the seventh floor, sometimes known as the Room of Requirement, I would find out something to my advantage. I questioned her a little further and she admitted that there was to be some kind of meeting there. Unfortunately at that point this hex," she waved impatiently at Marietta's concealed face, "came into operation and upon catching sight of her face in my mirror the girl became too distressed to tell me any more."

"Well, now," said Fudge, fixing Marietta with what he evidently imagined was a kind and fatherly look. "It is very brave of you, my dear, coming to tell Professor Umbridge, you did exactly the right thing. Now, will you tell me what happened at this meeting? What was its purpose? Who was there?"

But Marietta would not speak. She merely shook her head again, her eyes wide and fearful.

"Haven't we got a counterjinx for this?" Fudge asked Umbridge impatiently, gesturing at Marietta's face. "So she can speak freely?"

“I have not yet managed to find one,” Umbridge admitted grudgingly, and Harry felt a surge of pride in Hermione’s jinxing ability. “But it doesn’t matter if she won’t speak, I can take up the story from here.

“You will remember, Minister, that I sent you a report back in October that Potter had met a number of fellow students in the Hog’s Head in Hogsmeade —”

“And what is your evidence for that?” cut in Professor McGonagall.

“I have testimony from Willy Widdershins, Minerva, who happened to be in the bar at the time. He was heavily bandaged, it is true, but his hearing was quite unimpaired,” said Umbridge smugly. “He heard every word Potter said and hastened straight to the school to report to me —”

“Oh, so *that’s* why he wasn’t prosecuted for setting up all those regurgitating toilets!” said Professor McGonagall, raising her eyebrows. “What an interesting insight into our justice system!”

“Blatant corruption!” roared the portrait of the corpulent, red-nosed wizard on the wall behind Dumbledore’s desk. “The Ministry did not cut deals with petty criminals in my day, no sir, they did not!”

“Thank you, Fortescue, that will do,” said Dumbledore softly.

“The purpose of Potter’s meeting with these students,” continued Professor Umbridge, “was to persuade them to join an illegal society, whose aim was to learn spells and curses the Ministry has decided are inappropriate for school-age —”

“I think you’ll find you’re wrong there, Dolores,” said Dumbledore quietly, peering at her over the half-moon spectacles

perched halfway down his crooked nose.

Harry stared at him. He could not see how Dumbledore was going to talk him out of this one; if Willy Widdershins had indeed heard every word he said in the Hog's Head there was simply no escaping it.

"Oho!" said Fudge, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet again. "Yes, do let's hear the latest cock-and-bull story designed to pull Potter out of trouble! Go on, then, Dumbledore, go on — Willy Widdershins was lying, was he? Or was it Potter's identical twin in the Hog's Head that day? Or is there the usual simple explanation involving a reversal of time, a dead man coming back to life, and a couple of invisible dementors?"

Percy Weasley let out a hearty laugh.

"Oh, very good, Minister, very good!"

Harry could have kicked him. Then he saw, to his astonishment, that Dumbledore was smiling gently too.

"Cornelius, I do not deny — and nor, I am sure, does Harry — that he was in the Hog's Head that day, nor that he was trying to recruit students to a Defense Against the Dark Arts group. I am merely pointing out that Dolores is quite wrong to suggest that such a group was, at that time, illegal. If you remember, the Ministry decree banning all student societies was not put into effect until two days after Harry's Hogsmeade meeting, so he was not breaking any rules in the Hog's Head at all."

Percy looked as though he had been struck in the face by something very heavy. Fudge remained motionless in mid-bounce, his mouth hanging open.

Umbridge recovered first.

“That’s all very fine, Headmaster,” she said, smiling sweetly. “But we are now nearly six months on from the introduction of Educational Decree Number Twenty-four. If the first meeting was not illegal, all those that have happened since most certainly are.”

“Well,” said Dumbledore, surveying her with polite interest over the top of his interlocked fingers, “they certainly *would* be, if they *had* continued after the decree came into effect. Do you have any evidence that these meetings continued?”

As Dumbledore spoke, Harry heard a rustle behind him and rather thought Kingsley whispered something. He could have sworn too that he felt something brush against his side, a gentle something like a draft or bird wings, but looking down he saw nothing there.

“Evidence?” repeated Umbridge with that horrible wide toadlike smile. “Have you not been listening, Dumbledore? Why do you think Miss Edgecombe is here?”

“Oh, can she tell us about six months’ worth of meetings?” said Dumbledore, raising his eyebrows. “I was under the impression that she was merely reporting a meeting tonight.”

“Miss Edgecombe,” said Umbridge at once, “tell us how long these meetings have been going on, dear. You can simply nod or shake your head, I’m sure that won’t make the spots worse. Have they been happening regularly over the last six months?”

Harry felt a horrible plummeting in his stomach. This was it, they had hit a dead end of solid evidence that not even Dumbledore would be able to shift aside. . . .

“Just nod or shake your head, dear,” Umbridge said coaxingly to

Marietta. "Come on, now, that won't activate the jinx further . . ."

Everyone in the room was gazing at the top of Marietta's face. Only her eyes were visible between the pulled up robes and her curly fringe. Perhaps it was a trick of the firelight, but her eyes looked oddly blank. And then — to Harry's utter amazement — Marietta shook her head.

Umbridge looked quickly at Fudge and then back at Marietta.

"I don't think you understood the question, did you, dear? I'm asking whether you've been going to these meetings for the past six months? You have, haven't you?"

Again, Marietta shook her head.

"What do you mean by shaking your head, dear?" said Umbridge in a testy voice.

"I would have thought her meaning was quite clear," said Professor McGonagall harshly. "There have been no secret meetings for the past six months. Is that correct, Miss Edgecombe?"

Marietta nodded.

"But there was a meeting tonight!" said Umbridge furiously. "There was a meeting, Miss Edgecombe, you told me about it, in the Room of Requirement! And Potter was the leader, was he not, Potter organized it, Potter — *why are you shaking your head, girl?*"

"Well, usually when a person shakes their head," said McGonagall coldly, "they mean 'no.' So unless Miss Edgecombe is using a form of sign language as yet unknown to humans —"

Professor Umbridge seized Marietta, pulled her around to face her, and began shaking her very hard. A split second later Dumbledore was on his feet, his wand raised. Kingsley started forward and

Umbridge leapt back from Marietta, waving her hands in the air as though they had been burned.

“I cannot allow you to manhandle my students, Dolores,” said Dumbledore, and for the first time, he looked angry.

“You want to calm yourself, Madam Umbridge,” said Kingsley in his deep, slow voice. “You don’t want to get yourself into trouble now.”

“No,” said Umbridge breathlessly, glancing up at the towering figure of Kingsley. “I mean, yes — you’re right, Shackbolt — I — I forgot myself.”

Marietta was standing exactly where Umbridge had released her. She seemed neither perturbed by Umbridge’s sudden attack, nor relieved by her release. She was still clutching her robe up to her oddly blank eyes, staring straight ahead of her. A sudden suspicion connected to Kingsley’s whisper and the thing he had felt shoot past him sprang into Harry’s mind.

“Dolores,” said Fudge, with the air of trying to settle something once and for all, “the meeting tonight — the one we know definitely happened —”

“Yes,” said Umbridge, pulling herself together, “yes . . . well, Miss Edgecombe tipped me off and I proceeded at once to the seventh floor, accompanied by certain *trustworthy* students, so as to catch those in the meeting red-handed. It appears that they were forewarned of my arrival, however, because when we reached the seventh floor they were running in every direction. It does not matter, however, I have all their names here, Miss Parkinson ran into the Room of Requirement for me to see if they had left anything

behind. . . . We needed evidence and the room provided . . . ”

And to Harry’s horror, she withdrew from her pocket the list of names that had been pinned upon the Room of Requirement’s wall and handed it to Fudge.

“The moment I saw Potter’s name on the list, I knew what we were dealing with,” she said softly.

“Excellent,” said Fudge, a smile spreading across his face. “Excellent, Dolores. And . . . by thunder . . . ”

He looked up at Dumbledore, who was still standing beside Marietta, his wand held loosely in his hand.

“See what they’ve named themselves?” said Fudge quietly. “*Dumbledore’s Army*.”

Dumbledore reached out and took the piece of parchment from Fudge. He gazed at the heading scribbled by Hermione months before and for a moment seemed unable to speak. Then he looked up, smiling.

“Well, the game is up,” he said simply. “Would you like a written confession from me, Cornelius — or will a statement before these witnesses suffice?”

Harry saw McGonagall and Kingsley look at each other. There was fear in both faces. He did not understand what was going on, and neither, apparently, did Fudge.

“Statement?” said Fudge slowly. “What — I don’t — ?”

“Dumbledore’s Army, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore, still smiling as he waved the list of names before Fudge’s face. “Not Potter’s Army. *Dumbledore’s Army*.”

“But — but — ”

Understanding blazed suddenly in Fudge's face. He took a horrified step backward, yelped, and jumped out of the fire again.

"You?" he whispered, stamping again on his smoldering cloak.

"That's right," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

"You organized this?"

"I did," said Dumbledore.

"You recruited these students for — for your army?"

"Tonight was supposed to be the first meeting," said Dumbledore, nodding. "Merely to see whether they would be interested in joining me. I see now that it was a mistake to invite Miss Edgecombe, of course."

Marietta nodded. Fudge looked from her to Dumbledore, his chest swelling.

"Then you *have* been plotting against me!" he yelled.

"That's right," said Dumbledore cheerfully.

"NO!" shouted Harry.

Kingsley flashed a look of warning at him, McGonagall widened her eyes threateningly, but it had suddenly dawned upon Harry what Dumbledore was about to do, and he could not let it happen.

"No — Professor Dumbledore!"

"Be quiet, Harry, or I am afraid you will have to leave my office," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Yes, shut up, Potter!" barked Fudge, who was still ogling Dumbledore with a kind of horrified delight. "Well, well, well — I came here tonight expecting to expel Potter and instead —"

"Instead you get to arrest me," said Dumbledore, smiling. "It's like

losing a Knut and finding a Galleon, isn't it?"

"Weasley!" cried Fudge, now positively quivering with delight, "Weasley, have you written it all down, everything he's said, his confession, have you got it?"

"Yes, sir, I think so, sir!" said Percy eagerly, whose nose was splattered with ink from the speed of his note-taking.

"The bit about how he's been trying to build up an army against the Ministry, how he's been working to destabilize me?"

"Yes, sir, I've got it, yes!" said Percy, scanning his notes joyfully.

"Very well, then," said Fudge, now radiant with glee. "Duplicate your notes, Weasley, and send a copy to the *Daily Prophet* at once. If we send a fast owl we should make the morning edition!" Percy dashed from the room, slamming the door behind him, and Fudge turned back to Dumbledore. "You will now be escorted back to the Ministry, where you will be formally charged and then sent to Azkaban to await trial!"

"Ah," said Dumbledore gently, "yes. Yes, I thought we might hit that little snag."

"Snag?" said Fudge, his voice still vibrating with joy. "I see no snag, Dumbledore!"

"Well," said Dumbledore apologetically, "I'm afraid I do."

"Oh really?"

"Well — it's just that you seem to be laboring under the delusion that I am going to — what is the phrase? 'Come quietly.' I am afraid I am not going to come quietly at all, Cornelius. I have absolutely no intention of being sent to Azkaban. I could break out, of course — but what a waste of time, and frankly, I can think of a whole host of

things I would rather be doing.”

Umbridge’s face was growing steadily redder, she looked as though she was being filled with boiling water. Fudge stared at Dumbledore with a very silly expression on his face, as though he had just been stunned by a sudden blow and could not quite believe it had happened. He made a small choking noise and then looked around at Kingsley and the man with short gray hair, who alone of everyone in the room had remained entirely silent so far. The latter gave Fudge a reassuring nod and moved forward a little, away from the wall. Harry saw his hand drift, almost casually, toward his pocket.

“Don’t be silly, Dawlish,” said Dumbledore kindly. “I’m sure you are an excellent Auror, I seem to remember that you achieved ‘Outstanding’ in all your N.E.W.T.s, but if you attempt to — er — ‘bring me in’ by force, I will have to hurt you.”

The man called Dawlish blinked, looking rather foolish. He looked toward Fudge again, but this time seemed to be hoping for a clue as to what to do next.

“So,” sneered Fudge, recovering himself, “you intend to take on Dawlish, Shacklebolt, Dolores, and myself single-handed, do you, Dumbledore?”

“Merlin’s beard, no,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “Not unless you are foolish enough to force me to.”

“He will not be single-handed!” said Professor McGonagall loudly, plunging her hand inside her robes.

“Oh yes he will, Minerva!” said Dumbledore sharply. “Hogwarts needs you!”

“Enough of this rubbish!” said Fudge, pulling out his own wand. “Dawlish! Shackbolt! *Take him!*”

A streak of silver light flashed around the room. There was a bang like a gunshot, and the floor trembled. A hand grabbed the scruff of Harry’s neck and forced him down on the floor as a second silver flash went off — several of the portraits yelled, Fawkes screeched, and a cloud of dust filled the air. Coughing in the dust, Harry saw a dark figure fall to the ground with a crash in front of him. There was a shriek and a thud and somebody cried, “No!” Then the sound of breaking glass, frantically scuffling footsteps, a groan — and silence.

Harry struggled around to see who was half-strangling him and saw Professor McGonagall crouched beside him. She had forced both him and Marietta out of harm’s way. Dust was still floating gently down through the air onto them. Panting slightly, Harry saw a very tall figure moving toward them.

“Are you all right?” said Dumbledore.

“Yes!” said Professor McGonagall, getting up and dragging Harry and Marietta with her.

The dust was clearing. The wreckage of the office loomed into view: Dumbledore’s desk had been overturned, all of the spindly tables had been knocked to the floor, their silver instruments in pieces. Fudge, Umbridge, Kingsley, and Dawlish lay motionless on the floor. Fawkes the phoenix soared in wide circles above them, singing softly.

“Unfortunately, I had to hex Kingsley too, or it would have looked very suspicious,” said Dumbledore in a low voice. “He was remarkably quick on the uptake, modifying Miss Edgecombe’s

memory like that while everyone was looking the other way — thank him for me, won't you, Minerva?

“Now, they will all awake very soon and it will be best if they do not know that we had time to communicate — you must act as though no time has passed, as though they were merely knocked to the ground, they will not remember —”

“Where will you go, Dumbledore?” whispered Professor McGonagall. “Grimmauld Place?”

“Oh no,” said Dumbledore with a grim smile. “I am not leaving to go into hiding. Fudge will soon wish he'd never dislodged me from Hogwarts, I promise you . . .”

“Professor Dumbledore . . .” Harry began.

He did not know what to say first: how sorry he was that he had started the D.A. in the first place and caused all this trouble, or how terrible he felt that Dumbledore was leaving to save him from expulsion? But Dumbledore cut him off before he could say another word.

“Listen to me, Harry,” he said urgently, “you must study Occlumency as hard as you can, do you understand me? Do everything Professor Snape tells you and practice it particularly every night before sleeping so that you can close your mind to bad dreams — you will understand why soon enough, but you must promise me —”

The man called Dawlish was stirring. Dumbledore seized Harry's wrist.

“Remember — close your mind —”

But as Dumbledore's fingers closed over Harry's skin, a pain shot

through the scar on his forehead, and he felt again that terrible, snakelike longing to strike Dumbledore, to bite him, to hurt him —

“— you will understand,” whispered Dumbledore.

Fawkes circled the office and swooped low over him. Dumbledore released Harry, raised his hand, and grasped the phoenix's long golden tail. There was a flash of fire and the pair of them had gone.

“Where is he?” yelled Fudge, pushing himself up from the ground.
“*Where is he?*”

“I don't know!” shouted Kingsley, also leaping to his feet.

“Well, he can't have Disapparated!” cried Umbridge. “You can't inside this school —”

“The stairs!” cried Dawlish, and he flung himself upon the door, wrenched it open, and disappeared, followed closely by Kingsley and Umbridge. Fudge hesitated, then got to his feet slowly, brushing dust from his front. There was a long and painful silence.

“Well, Minerva,” said Fudge nastily, straightening his torn shirtsleeve, “I'm afraid this is the end of your friend Dumbledore.”

“You think so, do you?” said Professor McGonagall scornfully.

Fudge seemed not to hear her. He was looking around at the wrecked office. A few of the portraits hissed at him; one or two even made rude hand gestures.

“You'd better get those two off to bed,” said Fudge, looking back at Professor McGonagall with a dismissive nod toward Harry and Marietta.

She said nothing, but marched Harry and Marietta to the door. As it swung closed behind them, Harry heard Phineas Nigellus's voice.

“You know, Minister, I disagree with Dumbledore on many counts . . . but you cannot deny he’s got style . . .”

Die sentour en die klikbek

"Ek wed jy's nou spyt jy neem nie meer Waarsêery nie, Hermien," sê Parvati met 'n vermakerige laggie.

Dis twee dae ná professor Trelawney in die pad gesteeek is. Hulle is aan die ontbyttafel en Parvati is besig om haar wimpers om haar towerstaf te krul terwyl sy die effek in haar lepel se agterkant bewonder. Hulle gaan vanoggend vir hul eerste les by Firenze.

"Nie eintlik nie," sê Hermien onverskillig van agter die *Daaglikse Profeet*. "Ek hou nie juis van perde nie."

Sy blaai om en haar oë glip oor die berigte.

"Hy's nie 'n perd nie, hy's 'n sentour!" sê Hildegard geskok.

"'n Baie aantreklike sentour . . ." sug Parvati.

"Hy't nog steeds vier bene," sê Hermien kil. "In elk geval, ek dag julle twee is só ontsteld oor Trelawney weg is."

"Ons is!" verseker Hildegard haar. "Ons het vir haar in haar kantoor gaan kuier en vir haar affodille geneem – nie van Spruit s'n wat toet nie, mooies."

"Hoe gaan dit met haar?" vra Harry.

"Nie goed nie, die arme ding," sê Hildegard simpatiek. "Sy't ge-
huil en gesê sy gaan eerder vir ewig weg as om hier in die kasteel saam met Umbridge te bly. Ek kan haar nie blameer nie, Umbridge was baie goor met haar."

"Ek dink Umbridge oefen nog net om goor te wees," voorspel Hermien.

"Onmoontlik," sê Ron oor sy bord spek en eiers. "Sy kan nie erger word as nou nie."

"Ek sê vir julle, sy gaan wraak neem op Dompeldorius omdat hy 'n nuwe onderwyser aangestel het sonder om haar te raadpleeg," sê Hermien terwyl sy haar koerant toemaak. "Veral nog 'n halfmens. Het julle haar gesig gesien toe Firenze instap?"

Ná ontbyt gaan Hermien na haar Rekenmatiek-klas terwyl Harry

en Ron agter Parvati en Hildegard aan deur die ingangsportaal stap na Waarsêery.

“Gaan ons dan nie na die Noordtoring nie?” vra Ron verbaas toe Parvati verby die marmertappe loop.

Parvati kyk minagtend oor haar skouer na hom.

“Hoe moet Firenze met daardie leer opklim? Ons is nou in klaskamer 11. Dit was gister op die kennisgewingbord.”

Klaskamer 11 is op die grondverdieping met 'n gang af oorkant die Groot Saal. Harry weet dis een van daardie klaskamers wat selde gebruik word en daarom effens verwaarloos voel, soos 'n kas of 'n pakkamer. Hy stap ná Ron in en bevind hom tot sy verbystering in die middel van 'n oopte in 'n bos.

“Wat de –?”

Die klaskamer se vloer is bedek met sponserige mos. Die takke van groot bome wat daaruit groei, waai uit oor die plafon en vensters sodat sagte groen ligstrale kruis en dwars deur die vertrek val. Die studente wat reeds opgedaag het, sit op die grond met hul rûe teen boomstamme of rotse en lyk effens gespanne: hul arms is om hul knieë geslaan of gevou oor hulle borskaste. Firenze staan in die middel van die oopte waar daar geen bome is nie.

“Harry Potter,” sê hy toe Harry instap. Hy steek sy hand uit.

“O – hallo,” sê Harry. Hy skud die sentour se hand. Firenze staar na hom sonder om sy ongelooflike blou oë te knip of te glimlag. “Hm – goed om jou weer te sien.”

“En vir jou,” sê die sentour en laat sak sy witblonde kop. “Dit was voorspel dat ons weer sal ontmoet.”

Harry sien 'n kneusplek in die vorm van 'n hoef op Firenze se bors. Hy draai om en gaan sit by die res van die klas op die grond. Almal kyk in ontsag na hom, kennelik geïmponeer dat hy Firenze wat hulle vreesaanjaend vind, goed ken.

Toe die laaste aankomeling op 'n boomstomp langs die snippermandjie gaan sit het, wys Firenze na die vertrek.

“Professor Dompeldorius was so vriendelik om die klaskamer so in te rig dat dit my natuurlike habitat naboots,” sê Firenze. “Ek sou julle eerder in die Verbode Woud, wat tot Maandag my tuiste was, wou onderrig . . . maar dis nie meer moontlik nie.”

“Ekskuus – hm – meneer,” sê Parvati uitasem en steek haar hand op, “hoekom nie? Ons was saam met Hagrid in die Woud, ons is nie bang nie!”

“Die kwessie is nie julle dapperheid nie,” sê Firenze, “wel my posisie. Ek kan nie teruggaan na die Woud nie. My kudde het my verban.”

“Kudde?” Hildegard klink verward en Harry besef dat sy aan beeste dink. “Wat – o!” Haar gesig verhelder. “Dan is daar nog van julle?” vra sy verbysterd.

“Teel Hagrid ook met julle soos met die testralle?” vra Dean nuuskierig.

Firenze draai sy kop stadig na Dean, wat dadelik besef dat hy iets baie beledigends gesê het.

“Ek het nie bedoel – jammer,” sê hy gedemp.

“Sentours is nie mense se diensknegte of speelgoed nie,” sê Firenze kalm. Daar heers ’n doodse stilte en toe steek Parvati weer haar hand op.

“Verskoon my, meneer... maar hoekom het die ander sentours jou verban?”

“Omdat ek ingestem het om vir Dompeldorius te werk,” sê Firenze. “Hulle beskou dit as ’n vorm van verraad.”

Harry onthou hoe die sentour Bane ’n paar jaar gelede op Firenze geskree en hom ’n platvloerse muil genoem het toe hy Harry op sy rug na veiligheid gedra het. Hy wonder of dit Bane was wat vir Firenze teen die bors geskop het.

“Kom ons begin,” sê Firenze. Hy swaai sy lang wit stert, lig sy hand na die blaredak bo hul koppe en laat sak dit stadig. Die lig in die vertrek word onmiddellik dowwer en dit lyk soos aand in ’n oopte in die woud. Sterre verskyn teen die plafon. Die studente snak na asem en Ron fluister hoorbaar: “Jislaaik!”

“Lê rerug op die vloer,” sê Firenze in sy bedaarde stem, “en kyk na die hemel. Die toekoms van ons rasse staan daar geskryf vir almal wat kan sien.”

Harry gaan lê op sy rug en staar na die plafon. ’n Vonkelende rooi ster bo sy kop wink vir hom.

“Ek weet julle het die name van die planete en hul mane in Astronomie geleer,” sê Firenze rustig, “en dat julle die sterre se paaie deur die hemel volg. Sentours het die geheime van hierdie bewegings oor die eeue ontrafel. Ons bevindings het ons geleer dat die toekoms in die hemel bo ons gesien kan word –”

“Professor Trelawney het Astrologie met ons gedoen!” sê Parvati opgewonde en steek haar hand op sodat haar arm regop in die lug staan. “Mars veroorsaak ongelukke en brande en sulke goed en wanneer dit soos nou ’n hoek maak met Saturnus –” sy teken ’n reghoek in die lug bo haar “– beteken dit mense moet baie versigtig wees as hulle warm goed hanteer –”

“Dit,” sê Firenze bedaarde, “is die soort onsin wat mense glo.”

Parvati se hand val slap langs haar sy.

“Nietige wonde, klein menslike ongelukke,” sê Firenze en sy hoewe klop op die mosbegroeide vloer. “Gesien teen die groot heelal is sulke dinge net so onbenullig soos die geskarrel van miere. Dit word nie deur die planeet se bewegings beïnvloed nie.”

“Professor Trelawney –” begin Parvati gekrenk.

“– is ’n mens,” sê Firenze, “en dus verblind en gekniehalter deur die beperkings van jul soort.”

Harry draai sy kop effens om na Parvati te kyk. Sy lyk verontwaardig en so ook etlike mense om haar.

“Dalk kan Sibyll Trelawney Sien – ek weet nie,” gaan Firenze voort en Harry hoor hoe sy stert swiep terwyl hy op en neer voor hulle loop, “maar sy verkwis haar tyd met die selfverheerlikende onsin wat mense fortuinvertellery noem. Ek is hier om die kennis van die sentours aan julle oor te dra. Dis onpersoonlik en onpartydig. Ons bestudeer die hemel om die groot getye van boosheid of verandering wat soms daar aangeteken is, te sien. Dit kan tien jaar neem voor ons seker is wat ons sien.”

Firenze wys na die rooi ster reg bo Harry.

“Daar was die afgelope dekade aanduidings dat die towenaarsgemeenskap bloot ’n tydelike stilte tussen twee groot oorloë beleef. Mars, die draer van oorlog, skyn baie helder bo ons, wat daarop dui dat oorlog binnekort weer kan uitbreek. Sentours kan die tyd daarvan vasstel deur sekere kruie en blare te brand en die vlamme en rook te bestudeer . . .”

Dis die vreemdste les wat Harry nog ooit bygewoon het. Hulle brand salie en malvablare op die klaskamer se vloer terwyl Firenze hulle na sekere vorms en simbole in die geurige rook laat soek, maar hy lyk glad nie ontsteld toe niemand die tekens wat hy beskryf het, kan sien nie. Volgens hom kry mense dit selde reg en neem dit sentours jare en jare om dit te bemeester. Hierdie soort ding moet ook nie blindelings geglo word nie, omdat selfs sentours die tekens verkeerd kan lees. Hy is anders as al die onderwysers wat Harry al gehad het. Dit lyk nie of hy hulle wil leer wat hy weet nie, maar of hy eerder vir hulle wil wys dat niks, nie eens die sentours se kennis, onfeilbaar is nie.

“Hy’s nie baie seker van iets nie, of hoe?” sê Ron saggies toe hulle hul vuur van malvablare blus. “Ek bedoel, ek sal graag meer oor hierdie oorlog wil weet, en jy?”

Die klok lui daar buite en almal wip. Harry het skoon vergeet dat hulle in die kasteel is, so eg was die gevoel dat hulle regtig in die Woud is. Die studente lyk effens verward toe hulle uitstap.

Harry en Ron is op die punt om ook uit te stap toe Firenze sê: “Harry Potter, kan ek met jou praat, asseblief?”

Harry draai om. Die sentour kom 'n bietjie nader. Ron aarsel. "Jy kan bly," sê Firenze vir hom, "maar maak die deur toe, asseblief."

Ron maak so.

"Harry Potter, jy is Hagrid se vriend, nè?" vra die sentour.

"Ja," sê Harry.

"Gee vir hom 'n waarskuwing van my af. Sy poging werk nie. Hy moet dit eerder laat vaar."

"Sy poging werk nie," herhaal Harry dof.

"En hy moet dit eerder laat vaar." Firenze knik. "Ek sou self vir Hagrid gewaarsku het, maar ek is verban. Dit sal nie verstandig wees om in hierdie stadium na die Woud te gaan nie – Hagrid het genoeg probleme sonder 'n sentourgeveg."

"Maar – wat probeer Hagrid doen?" vra Harry senuagtig.

Firenze kyk uitdrukkingloos na hom.

"Hagrid het onlangs 'n groot guns aan my bewys," sê Firenze, "en ek respekteer hom al jare lank vir sy houding teenoor alle lewende wesens. Ek sal nie sy geheim verrai nie, maar hy moet tot sy sinne kom. Sê vir hom, Harry Potter. Tot siens."

Harry se gevoel van geluk ná die verskyning van die onderhoud in *Die Vitter* is al lankal iets van die verlede. 'n Vervelige Maart vervaag in 'n stormagtige April en sy lewe is nogmaals 'n lang reeks bekommernisse en probleme.

Umbridge woon nog steeds al die lesse vir *Versorging van Magiese Kreature* by en Harry kon dus nog nie Firenze se waarskuwing vir Hagrid gee nie. Hy kry dit uiteindelik op 'n dag reg toe hy maak of hy sy eksemplaar van *Fantasmagoriese Kreature en Waarom Hulle te Vind* verloor het en ná die klas moet teruggaan. Toe hy Firenze se woorde herhaal, staar Hagrid 'n rukkie deur geswelde swart oë na hom en lyk uit die veld geslaan. Maar hy ruk hom vinnig reg.

"Gawe vent, Firenze," sê hy skor, "maar hy weet nie waarvan hy praat nie. Die poging vorder goed."

"Hagrid, wat dóén jy?" vra Harry dringend. "Jy moet lig loop, Umbridge het reeds vir Trelawney uitgewerk en ek dink sy's op die oorlogspad. As jy met iets besig is wat jy liewer nie –"

"Daar's belangriker goed as om 'n jop te hê," sê Hagrid, hoewel sy hande effens skud sodat hy 'n skottel knarlmis op die vloer laat val. "Moet jou nie oor my bekommer nie, Harry. Loop nou, toe."

Harry het nie 'n keuse nie. Hy voel uiters bedruk toe hy terugstap kasteel toe, terwyl Hagrid agterbly om die mis op te vee.

Intussen, soos die onderwysers en Hermien hulle gedurig herinner, kom hul UILE al nader. Al die vyfdejaars ervaar stres van die een of ander aard, maar Hanna Abbott moet 'n kalmeringsdrankie by Madame Pomfrey kry toe sy tydens Herbologie in tranen uitbars en snikkend sê sy's te dom vir die eksamens en sy wil nie meer skoolgaan nie.

As dit nie vir die DS-byeenkomste was nie, sou Harry ontsettend ongelukkig gewees het. Dit voel soms of sy lewe draai om die paar uur wat hy in die Vertrek vir Vereistes deurbring. Hoewel dit harde werk is, geniet hy elke oomblik daarvan en hy swel van trots as hy sien hoe goed die DS-lede vorder. Hy wonder soms wat Umbridge sal doen as al die DS-lede "Uitstekend" in hul UILE vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste moet kry.

Hulle het uiteindelik met groot entoesiasme aan die Patronus begin werk, maar, soos Harry gedurig vir hulle sê, dis baie makliker om 'n Patronus in 'n veilige, helder verligte vertrek op te tower as wanneer jy deur iets soos 'n Dementor bedreig word.

"Ag, moenie so 'n pretbederwer wees nie," sê Cho vrolik tydens hul laaste les voor Paasfees. Sy kyk na haar silwer Patronus in die vorm van 'n swaan wat deur die Vertrek vir Vereistes sweef. "Hulle is so mooi!"

"Hulle is nie veronderstel om mooi te wees nie, hulle moet jou beskerm," sê Harry geduldig. "Wat ons moet hê, is 'n boggart of so iets. Dis hoe ek geleer het. Ek moes 'n Patronus optower terwyl die boggart gemaak het of hy 'n Dementor is –"

"Maar dit sal vreeslik wees!" sê Hildegard, uit wie se towerstaf net klein silwer wolkies skiet. "En ek – kry dit – nog steeds nie reg nie!" voeg sy ergerlik by.

Neville sukkel ook. Hy konsentreer só dat sy gesig op 'n plooi getrek is, maar daar kom net 'n flou silwer rokie uit sy towerstaf se punt.

"Jy moet aan iets dink wat jou gelukkig maak," sê Harry vir hom. "Ek probeer," sê Neville mistroostig, sy ronde gesig blink van die sweet.

"Harry, ek dink ek kry dit reg!" skree Septimus, wat vir sy eerste DS-byeenkoms saam met Dean gekom het. "Kyk – aag – dis weg maar dit was beslis iets harigs, Harry!"

Hermien se Patronus, 'n blink silwer otter, dartel om haar. "Hulle is nogal oulik, nè," sê sy en kyk liefderik daarna.

Die deur van die Vertrek vir Vereistes gaan oop en weer toe. Harry kyk om, maar sien niemand nie. Hy besef eers 'n paar sekondes later dat die mense by die deur stil geword het. Die volgende

oomblik pluk iets aan sy kleed naby sy knie. Hy kyk af en sien tot sy verbasing vir Dobbi die huiself met die gewone agt wolhoede op sy kop.

"Hallo, Dobbi!" sê hy. "Wat maak jy – Wat's fout?"

Die elf se oë is wyd van angs en hy bewe. Die lede van die DS naaste aan Harry is doodstil. Almal staar na Dobbi. Die paar opgetowerde Patronusse vervaag in 'n silwer mis sodat die kamer skielik donkerder is.

"Harry Potter, meneer . . ." piep die bewende elf, "Harry Potter, meneer . . . Dobbi het jou kom waarsku . . . maar die huiselwe mag niks sê nie . . ."

Hy hardloop kop eerste in die muur vas. Harry ken Dobbi se maniere om homself te straf en probeer nog keer, maar Dobbi bons terug, gekussing deur sy agt hoede. Hermien en 'n paar van die meisies skree uit vrees en simpatie.

"Wat gaan aan, Dobbi?" Harry gryp die elf se dun armpie en hou hom so ver moontlik weg van enigiets waarmee hy hom kan seermaak.

"Harry Potter . . . sy . . . sy . . ."

Dobbi slaan homself hard teen die neus met sy ander vuus. Harry gryp dit ook.

"Wie is 'sy', Dobbi?"

Maar hy dink hy weet. Daar kan net een "sy" wees wat vir Dobbi só bang maak. Die elf lyk effens skeel toe hy opkyk en sy mond gaan oop en toe sonder dat daar woorde uitkom.

"Umbridge?" vra Harry verskrik.

Dobbi knik en probeer om sy kop teen Harry se knieë te stamp. Harry hou hom op 'n armlengte weg.

"Wat van haar, Dobbi – het sy uitgevind van ons – van die DS?"

Hy lees die antwoord op die elf se paniekerige gesig. Omdat Harry sy hande vashou, probeer die elf homself pootjie sodat hy moet val.

"Is sy op pad hierheen?" vra Harry stil.

Dobbi uiter 'n kreet en stamp sy kaal voete hard teen die vloer.

"Ja, Harry Potter, ja!"

Harry kom orent en kyk na die verskrikte DS-lede wat nog steeds doodstil na die wriemelende elf staar.

"WAARVOOR WAG JULLE?" brul Harry. "HARDLOOP!"

Hulle storm gelyk na die uitgang en vorm 'n soort skrum voor die deur. Harry hoor hoe hulle in die gang af nael en hoop hulle het genoeg verstand om nie almal reguit na hul slaapsale te hardloop.

nie. Dis nou eers tien voor nege. As hulle biblioteek toe gaan of na die Uilhuis, wat albei nader is –

“Harry, komaan!” skree Hermien uit die middel van die groep mense wat nog stoei om by die deur uit te kom.

Harry raap vir Dobbi op wat homself nog steeds probeer beseer en hardloop na die end van die ry.

“Dobbi, dis ’n bevel – gaan terug na die ander elwe in die kombuis en as sy jou vra of jy my gewaarsku het, moet jy lieg en sê jy het nie! En ek verbied jou om jouself seer te maak!” Hy sit die elf neer toe hy oor die drumpel is en slaan die deur agter hom toe.

“Dankie, Harry Potter!” piep Dobbi en laat vat. Harry kyk na links en regs. Die ander studente hardloop só vinnig dat hy net hakke sien voor hulle om die hoeke verdwyn. Hy hardloop na regs. Daar is ’n kleedkamer vir seuns voor in die gang, hy sal maak of hy nog die hele tyd daar was. As hy dit net betyds kan haal –

“AAAAARG!”

Iets vang hom om die enkel en hy slaan soos ’n os neer en gly ongeveer ses tree oor die vloer voor hy tot stilstand kom. Agter hom lag iemand. Hy rol om op sy rug en sien Malfoy wegkruip in ’n nis agter ’n lelike draakvormige vaas.

“Pootjiepaljas, Potter!” grynslag hy. “Haai, Professor – PROFESSOR! Ek het een!”

Umbridge stommel om die verste hoek, uitasem maar triomfantlik.

“Dis hy!” jubel sy toe sy vir Harry op die vloer sien lê. “Uitstekend, Draco, uitstekend, o baie goed – vyftig punte vir Slibberin! Ek sal met hom afreken . . . Staan op, Potter!”

Harry staan op en gluur na hulle. Hy het nog nooit vir Umbridge so gelukkig sien lyk nie. Sy gryp sy arm in ’n stewige greep en glimlag breed vir Malfoy.

“Kyk of jy nog van hulle kry, Draco. Sê vir die ander hulle moet in die biblioteek kyk vir mense wat uitasem is. En soek in die badkamers, juffrou Parkinson kan die meisies s’n doen – weg is julle – en jy,” voeg sy by in haar sagste, gevaarlikste stemmetjie, “jy kom saam met my na die skoolhoof se kantoor, Potter.”

Hulle is binne minute by die klipdrakekop. Harry wonder wie van die ander ook gevang is. Hy dink aan Ron – mevrou Weasley sal hom vermoor – en hoe Hermien sal voel as sy geskors moet word voor sy haar Uile kon afhandel. Dit was Septimus se eerste byeenkoms . . . en Neville was al so goed . . .

“Sissende Sisbee,” koer Umbridge. Die drakekop spring uit die pad, die muur gaan oop en hulle styg met die draaiende kliptrap

boontoe. Toe hulle by die gepoleerde deur met die griffioenklopper kom, klop Umbridge nie eens nie, maar stap eenvoudig in met Harry nog steeds in haar greep.

Die kantoor is vol mense. Dompeldorius sit agter sy lessenaar, sy gesig kalm en die punte van sy lang vingers teen mekaar gedruk. Professor McGonagall staan stokstyf langs hom, haar gesig besonder gespanne. Cornelius Broddelwerk wieg vorentoe en agtertoe op sy tone voor die vuur, duidelik in sy skik met die situasie. Kingsley Shacklebolt en 'n vreemde towenaar met kort stekelhare wat baie kwaai lyk, staan soos wagte aan weerskante van die deur. Percy Weasley se besproete, bebrilde vorm staan langs die muur, 'n veerpen en 'n rol perkament in sy hande, klaarblyklik om notas mee te maak.

Vannag maak die portrette van die ou skoolhoofde nie of hulle slaap nie. Almal is wakker, ernstig en hou die gebeure aandagtig dop. 'n Paar skarrel na naburige rame en fluister vir mekaar toe Harry inkom.

Toe die deur agter hulle toegaan, ruk Harry hom los uit Umbridge se greep. Cornelius Broddelwerk gluur met 'n soort gemene behae na hom.

"Wel," sê hy, "wel, wel, wel . . ."

Harry gee hom 'n vuil kyk. Sy hart klop wild, maar sy brein is vreemd helder en kalm.

"Hy was op pad na die Griffindor-toring," sê Umbridge opgewonde. Harry hoor dieselfde soort sadistiese genot in haar stem soos toe sy haar in professor Trelawney se ellende in die ingangsportaal verlekke het. "Die Malfoy-seun het hom gevang."

"O, het hy?" sê Broddelwerk in sy skik. "Ek moet onthou om vir Lucius te sê. Wel, Potter . . . jy weet seker hoekom jy hier is?"

Harry was vas van plan om uitdagend "ja" te sê. Sy mond is reeds oop en die woord lê gereed op sy lippe toe hy Dompeldorius se gesig sien. Dompeldorius kyk nie na Harry nie – sy oë rus iewers anderkant Harry se skouer – maar beweeg sy kop baie effens van kant tot kant.

Harry verander onmiddellik van plan.

"J-nee."

"Ekskuus?" sê Broddelwerk.

"Nee," sê Harry beslis.

"Jy weet nie hoekom jy hier is nie?"

"Nee, ek weet nie," sê Harry.

Broddelwerk kyk ongelowig van Harry na professor Umbridge. Harry gebruik die geleentheid om weer vinnig na Dompeldorius te loer, wat effens vir die mat knik en so ampertjies knipoog.

“Jy het dus geen idee,” Broddelwerk se stem drup van sarkasme, “hoekom professor Umbridge jou kantoor toe gebring het nie? Jy is nie bewus van enige skoolreëls wat jy oortree het nie?”

“Skoolreëls?” sê Harry. “Nee.”

“Of Opvoedkundige Dekrete?” verbeter Broddelwerk ergerlik.

“Nie waarvan ek weet nie,” sê Harry uitdrukkingloos.

Sy hart klop nog steeds baie vinnig. Dis dit amper werd om so te lieg net om Broddelwerk se bloeddruk te sien styg, maar hy weet nie hoe op aarde hy hiermee gaan wegkom nie. As iemand hulle by Umbridge verklap het, kan hy as die leier van die DS maar sy trommel pak.

“Dis dus vir jou nuus,” sê Broddelwerk, sy stem swaar van woede, “dat ’n onwettige studenteorganisasie in die skool gevind is?”

“Ja, dit is,” sê Harry en probeer maak of hy baie verbaas en ook heeltemal onskuldig is.

“Ek reken, Minister,” sê Umbridge stroperig, “ons sal beter vorder as ek ons informant gaan haal.”

“Ja, ja, goed,” sê Broddelwerk. Hy knik en kyk wrewelig na Dompeldorius toe Umbridge uitstap. “Daar is niks soos ’n goeie getuie nie, of hoe, Dompeldorius?”

“Hoegenaamd niks nie, Cornelius,” beaam Dompeldorius en laat sak sy kop.

Dis ’n rukkie stil en niemand kyk na mekaar nie. Dan hoor Harry hoe die deur agter hulle oopgaan. Umbridge stap verby hom, haar hand op Marietta, Cho se krulkopvriendin, se skouer. Marietta steek haar gesig in haar hande weg.

“Moenie bang wees nie, skat,” sê professor Umbridge sag en klop haar liggies teen die rug, “dis alles reg. Jy het reg opgetree. Die Minister is baie tevrede met jou. Hy gaan vir jou moeder vertel wat ’n goeie kind jy is. Marietta se moeder, Minister,” sy kyk na Broddelwerk, “is Madame Edgecombe van die Departement vir Magiese Vervoer, Kantoor vir die Floo-netwerk – sy help om Hogwarts se vure dop te hou.”

“Mooi, mooi!” sê Broddelwerk hartlik. “Aard na haar moeder, nè? Toe nou, kind, kyk op, moenie skaam wees nie, vertel vir ons wat jy weet – grote genugtig!”

Toe Marietta haar kop lig, spring Broddelwerk geskok agteruit en beland amper in die vuur. Hy vloek en trap op sy kleed se soom wat begin rook het. Marietta los ’n kreet en pluk haar kleed aan die nek op tot onder haar oë, maar almal in die vertrek het reeds haar aaklig geskende gesig gesien. ’n Reeks perserige puisies en knoppe oor haar wange en neus vorm die woord “KLIKBEK”.

“Moet jou nie oor ’n paar puisies kwel nie, kind,” sê Umbridge ongeduldig, “haal die kleed van jou gesig af en sê vir die Minister –”

Maar Marietta uiter nog ’n gesmoorde kreet en skud haar kop woes heen en weer.

“Goed dan, jou verspotte kind, *ek* sal vir hom vertel,” snou Umbridge. Sy plak weer haar sieklike glimlaggie op haar gesig en sê: “Wel, Minister, juffrou Edgecombe het kort ná aandete na my kantoor gekom en gesê daar is iets wat sy vir my moet vertel. Sy’t gesê ek moet na ’n geheime kamer op die sewende verdieping gaan, ook bekend as die Vertrek vir Vereistes, waar ek iets sal sien wat my sal interesseer. Ek het haar ’n bietjie uitgevra en sy’t erken dat daar ’n soort byeenkoms gehou gaan word. Ongelukkig het hierdie vlakkeste vloek,” sy wys na Marietta se gesig, “op daardie oomblik begin werk en toe die kind haar gesig in my spieël sien, was sy te ontsteld om verder te praat.”

“Wel, wel,” sê Broddelwerk en kyk na Marietta op ’n manier wat hy skynbaar dink vriendelik en vaderlik is, “dit was baie dapper van jou om dit vir professor Umbridge te vertel. Jy het die regte ding gedoen. Vertel nou vir ons wat tydens hierdie byeenkoms gebeur het. Wat was die doel? Wie was almal daar?”

Maar Marietta weier om te praat en skud net haar kop, haar oë groot en bang.

“Het ons nie ’n teenvloek hiervoor nie?” sê Broddelwerk ongeduldig en wys na Marietta se gesig. “Sodat sy vryelik kan praat?”

“Ek kon nog nie iets kry nie,” erken Umbridge gegrief en Harry voel trots op Hermien se vermoëns. “Maar dit maak nie saak as sy nie wil praat nie, ek sal verder vertel.

“U sal onthou, Minister, dat ek in Oktober verslag gedoen het dat Potter ’n aantal studente in Die Swynenes in Hogsmeade ontmoet het –”

“Waar is die bewyse?” vra professor McGonagall.

“Ek het Willy Widdershins se getuienis, Minerva. Hy was op daardie oomblik in die kroeg. Hy was weliswaar toegewikkel in verbande, maar hy kon nog steeds baie goed hoor,” sê Umbridge selfvoldaan. “Hy het elke woord wat Potter gesê het gehoor en hom skool toe gehaas om dit aan my oor te dra –”

“A, dan is dit hoekom hy nie vir die terugvloeiende toilette gevolg is nie!” Professor McGonagall lig haar wenkbroue. “Watter interessante insig in ons regstelsel!”

“Blatante korrupsie!” brul die portret van die vet towenaar met die rooi neus teen die muur agter Dompeldorius se lessenaar. “Op my dag het die Ministerie nie agteraf met misdadigers gekonkel nie, o nee!”

“Dankie, Fortescue, dis genoeg,” sê Dompeldorius sag.

“Die doel van Potter se vergadering met hierdie studente,” gaan professor Umbridge voort, “was om hulle te oorreed om by ’n onwettige vereniging aan te sluit waar hulle towerspreuke en vloeke sou leer wat volgens die Ministerie nie geskik is vir skool –”

“Ek dink jy maak ’n fout, Dolores,” sê Dompeldorius sag en staar oor sy halfmaanbril in die middel van sy krom neus na haar.

Harry gaap hom aan. Hy kan nie sien hoe Dompeldorius hom uit hierdie een gaan loskry nie. As Willy Widdershins wel elke woord gehoor het wat Harry in Die Swynenes gesê het, is daar geen uitkomkans nie.

“Oho!” sê Broddelwerk en bons op en af op die balle van sy voete. “Kom ons luister na die jongste wolhaarstorie om Potter uit die pekel te kry! Gaan voort, Dompeldorius, gaan voort – Willy Widdershins het seker gelieg, nê? Of was Potter se identiese tweeling daardie dag in Die Swynenes? Of is dit ’n geval van tydomkering: ’n dooie man wat weer lewe en ’n paar onsigbare Dementors?”

Percy Weasley lag hartlik.

“O, baie goed, Minister, baie goed!”

Harry kan hom skop. Maar hy sien tot sy verbasing dat Dompeldorius ook glimlag.

“Cornelius, ek probeer nie ontken – en ek is seker Harry sal ook nie – dat hy daardie dag in Die Swynenes was om studente te werf vir ’n groep vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste nie. Wat ek probeer sê, is dat Dolores ’n fout maak as sy sê dat so ’n groep in daardie stadium onwettig was. As ek reg onthou, is die Ministerie se Dekreet teen studenteorganisasies eers twee dae ná Harry se vergadering in Hogsmeade uitgevaardig. Hy het dus geen reëls in Die Swynenes oortree nie.”

Percy lyk asof ’n skoot koue water hom in die gesig getref het. Broddelwerk staan roerloos en sy mond hang oop.

Umbridge herstel eerste.

“Dis alles goed en wel, meneer die skoolhoof,” sê sy met ’n soet glimlaggie, “maar dis nou reeds ses maande ná die uitvaardiging van Opvoedkundige Dekreet Nommer Vier-en-twintig. Indien die eerste byeenkoms nie onwettig was nie, was die ander daarna vir seker.”

“Wel,” sê Dompeldorius en kyk met beleefde belangstelling oor sy gepunte vingers na haar, “hulle sou inderdaad wees indien die studente daarmee voortgegaan het nadat die Dekreet uitgevaardig is. Kan julle enige verdere bewyse van byeenkomste verskaf?”

Terwyl Dompeldorius praat, voel Harry ’n ritseling agter hom en hy verbeel hom dat Kingsley iets fluister. Hy kan ook sweer dat iets

verby hom geskuur het, iets sags soos 'n ligte bries of 'n voël se vlerk, maar toe hy afkyk, sien hy niks.

“Bewyse?” herhaal Umbridge en glimlag aaklig breed en paddaagtig. “Het jy nie geluister nie, Dompeldorius? Hoekom dink jy is juffrou Edgecombe hier?”

“O, kan sy vir ons van die ses maande se byeenkomste vertel?” Dompeldorius lig sy wenkbroue. “Ek was onder die indruk dat sy 'n byeenkoms gerapporteer het wat vanaand gehou sou word.”

“Juffrou Edgecombe,” sê Umbridge dadelik, “vertel vir ons hoe lank hierdie byeenkomste al gehou word, skat. Jy hoef net te knik of jou kop te skud. Ek is seker dit sal nie die puisies erger maak nie. Is die byeenkomste die afgelope ses maande gereeld gehou?”

Harry voel hoe sy maag hol word. Hier kom dit nou, soliede getuienis wat selfs Dompeldorius nie sal kan wegpraat nie.

“Jy hoef net jou kop te knik of te skud, skat,” sê Umbridge weer vir Marietta. “Toe nou, dit sal nie weer die vloek aktiveer nie.”

Almal in die vertrek staar na die gedeelte van Marietta se gesig wat bo haar kleed uitsteek. Net haar oë en krullerige kuif is sigbaar. Dalk is dit die flikkerende vuurlig, maar haar oë lyk vreemd leeg. En toe – tot Harry se grootste verbasing – skud Marietta haar kop.

Umbridge kyk vlugtig na Broddelwerk en toe weer na Marietta.

“Ek dink nie jy verstaan die vraag nie, skat. Ek wil weet of julle die afgelope ses maande byeenkomste gehad het. Het julle, of het julle nie?”

Marietta skud weer haar kop.

“Presies wat bedoel jy as jy jou kop skud, skat?” vra Umbridge in 'n skril stem.

“Ek sou reken haar bedoeling is heeltemal duidelik,” sê professor McGonagall ergerlik. “Daar was die afgelope ses maande geen geheime byeenkomste nie, of hoe, juffrou Edgecombe?”

Marietta knik.

“Maar daar was vannag een!” sê Umbridge kwaad. “Daar was 'n byeenkoms, juffrou Edgecombe, in die Vertrek vir Vereistes, jy't dit vir my kom sê! En Potter was die leier, was hy nie? Potter het dit georganiseer – hoekom skud jy jou kop, kind?”

“Wel, gewoonlik as 'n persoon haar kop skud,” sê professor McGonagall, “beteken dit ‘nee’. Tensy juffrou Edgecombe die een of ander gebaretaal ken wat geen ander mens ken nie –”

Professor Umbridge gryp vir Marietta, swaai haar om en skud haar baie hard. Dompeldorius kom onmiddellik orent met sy towerstaf uitgestrek voor hom en Kingsley tree vorentoe. Umbridge los vir Marietta, spring agteruit en waai haar hande in die lug asof hulle brand.

“Ek sal nie toelaat dat jy my studente mishandel nie, Dolores,” sê Dompeldorius en vir die eerste keer lyk hy kwaad.

“Bedaar, Madame Umbridge,” sê Kingsley in sy stadige, diep stem. “Voor jy in die moeilikheid beland.”

“Nee,” sê Umbridge uitasem. Sy kyk op na Kingsley, wat oor haar toring. “Ek bedoel, ja – jy’s reg, Shacklebolt – ek – ek het ’n fout gemaak.”

Marietta staan nog net waar Umbridge haar gelos het. Sy lyk nie ontsteld deur Umbridge se skielike aanval nie, maar ook nie verlig dat sy vry is nie. Sy klou bloot haar kleed vas en staar met leë oë voor haar uit.

’n Vreemde suspisie oor Kingsley se fluistering en die ding wat verby hom geskiet het, flits deur Harry se brein.

“Dolores,” sê Broddelwerk asof hy iets finaal wil afhandel, “vanaand se byeenkoms – die een wat ons doodseker is sou plaasvind –”

“Ja,” sê Umbridge en ruk haar reg. “Ja . . . goed, juffrou Edgecombe het vir my ’n wenk gegee en ek het dadelik na die sewende verdieping gegaan, vergesel van ’n paar *betroubare* studente, om die mense by die byeenkoms op heter daad te betrap. Hulle het skynbaar van my geweet, want toe ons by die sewende verdieping kom, het hulle na alle kante laat spat. Maar dit maak nie saak nie, ek het juffrou Parkinson gestuur om die Vertrek vir Vereistes binne te gaan om te kyk of iets agtergebly het. Ons moes bewyse hê – en die vertrek het dit voorsien.”

Skok skiet deur Harry toe sy die lys name wat teen die muur van die Vertrek vir Vereistes geplak was uit haar sak haal en vir Broddelwerk aangee.

“Die oomblik toe ek Potter se naam op die lys sien, het ek geweet waarmee ons te doen het,” sê sy sag.

“Uitstekend,” sê Broddelwerk en ’n glimlag vertrek sy gesig, “uitstekend, Dolores. En – grote genugtig . . .”

Hy kyk na Dompeldorius, wat nog steeds met sy towerstaf liggies in sy hand langs Marietta staan.

“Sien jy wat noem hulle hulself?” sê Broddelwerk gedemp. “Dompeldorius se Soldate.”

Dompeldorius steek sy hand uit en neem die stuk perkament by Broddelwerk. Hy staar na die opskrif wat Hermien maande gelede daarop neergeskryf het en lyk vir ’n oomblik sprakeloos. Dan kyk hy glimlaggend op.

“Wel, my saak is verlore,” sê hy eenvoudig. “Wil jy ’n geskrewe skulderkennis hê, Cornelius – of sal ’n verklaring voor hierdie getuies voldoende wees?”

Harry sien hoe McGonagall en Kingsley na mekaar kyk. Daar is vrees op albei se gesigte. Harry verstaan nie wat aangaan nie en Broddelwerk skynbaar ook nie.

“Verklaring?” sê Broddelwerk stadig. “Wat – ek verstaan nie –?”

“Dompeldorius se Soldate, Cornelius,” sê Dompeldorius en waai die lys name nog steeds glimlaggend voor Broddelwerk se gesig. “Nie Potter se Soldate nie. *Dompeldorius se Soldate.*”

“Maar – maar –”

Begrip daag skielik in Broddelwerk se oë. Hy tree verskrik agteruit, gil en spring weg van die vuur.

“Jy?” fluister hy terwyl hy op sy rokende kleed trap.

“Dis reg,” sê Dompeldorius opgeruimd.

“Jy het dit georganiseer?”

“Ek het,” sê Dompeldorius.

“Jy het hierdie studente gewerf as – as jou soldate?”

Dompeldorius knik. “Vannag sou die eerste byeenkoms gewees het. Bloot om te sien of hulle belang stel om aan te sluit. Ek sien natuurlik nou dit was ’n fout om juffrou Edgcombe te nooi.”

Marietta knik gedwee. Broddelwerk kyk van haar na Dompeldorius en sy borskas swel.

“Dan het jy teen my saamgesweer!” skreeu hy.

“Dis reg,” sê Dompeldorius vrolik.

“NEE!” skree Harry.

Kingsley kyk waarskuwend na hom en McGonagall rek haar oë waarskuwend, maar Harry het skielik besef wat Dompeldorius besig is om te doen en hy weier om dit toe te laat.

“Nee – professor Dompeldorius –!”

“Bly stil, Harry, of ek is bevrees jy sal my kantoor moet verlaat,” sê Dompeldorius bedoord.

“Ja, hou jou snater, Potter!” blaf Broddelwerk, wat nog steeds met ’n soort gewalgde vreugde na Dompeldorius gluur. “Wel, wel, wel – ek het hierheen gekom met die verwagting om Potter te skors en pleks daarvan –”

“Pleks daarvan kan jy my arresteer,” sê Dompeldorius glimlaggend. “Dis soos om ’n Knoet te verloor en ’n Galjoen te kry, of hoe?”

“Weasley!” skree Broddelwerk, wat nou van vreugde bewe. “Weasley, het jy alles neergeskryf? Alles wat hy gesê het, sy erkentenis, het jy dit?”

“Ja, meneer, ek dink so, meneer!” sê Percy gretig, sy neus vol inkspsatsels van die vinnige notas.

“Daardie gedeelte oor hoe hy ’n weermag teen die Ministerie opbou, hoe hy werk om my te ontwrig?”

“Ja, meneer, ek het dit, ja!” sê Percy flink terwyl hy sy notas bestudeer.

“Goed dan.” Broddelwerk gloei van vreugde. “Maak ’n afskrif van jou notas, Weasley, en stuur onmiddellik een na die *Daaglikse Profeet*. As ons ’n vinnige uil gebruik, sal ons nog die oggenduitgawe haal!”

Percy storm uit die vertrek en slaan die deur agter hom toe. Broddelwerk draai na Dompeldorius. “Jy sal na die Ministerie geneem word waar jy amptelik aangekla sal word en van waar jy na Azkaban sal gaan ter afwagting van jou verhoor!”

“A,” sê Dompeldorius sag, “ja, ek het gedink ons sal met hierdie haakplek te doen kry.”

“Haakplek?” sê Broddelwerk, wie se stem nog steeds van vreugde tril. “Ek sien geen haakplek nie, Dompeldorius!”

“Wel,” sê Dompeldorius verskonend, “ek is bevrees ek sien een.”

“O, regtig?”

“Ja. Dis dat jy skynbaar onder die illusie verkeer dat ek – wat is die uitdrukking nou weer? – *my nie gaan verset nie*. Ek is bevrees ek gaan my verset, Cornelius. Ek is glad nie van plan om na Azkaban te gaan nie. Ek kan natuurlik ontsnap, maar wat ’n vermorsing van tyd, daar is baie ander goed wat ek eerder wil doen.”

Umbridge se gesig is besig om al rooier te word, asof sy vol kookwater geskink word. Broddelwerk staar met ’n baie koddige uitdrukking na Dompeldorius, asof iemand hom onverwags platgeslaan het en hy dit nog nie kan glo nie. Hy maak ’n stikgeluidjie en kyk na Kingsley en die man met die stekelhare, die enigste persoon wat tot dusver nog niks gesê het nie. Die gryskopman knik gerusstellend vir Broddelwerk en beweeg effens weg van die muur. Harry sien hoe sy hand amper ongeërg na sy sak gaan.

“Moenie verspot wees nie, Davel,” sê Dompeldorius vriendelik. “Ek is seker jy’s ’n uitmuntende Auror – ek verbeel my al jou OTte was *Uitstekend* – maar as jy gaan probeer om my – hm – *met geweld* in hegtenis te neem, sal ek jou moet seermaak.”

Davel knipper sy oë verlee en kyk na Broddelwerk asof hy leiding soek.

“So,” sê Broddelwerk smalend, “dan beplan jy om vir Davel, Shacklebolt, Dolores en my op jou eie te takel, hè, Dompeldorius?”

“Merlin se baard, nee,” sê Dompeldorius glimlaggend, “net as julle dwaas genoeg is om my te dwing.”

“Hy is nie alleen nie!” sê professor McGonagall skril en steek haar hand in haar kleed.

“O ja, hy is, Minerva!” sê Dompeldorius kwaai. “Hogwarts het jou nodig!”

“Genoeg van hierdie twak!” sê Broddelwerk en haal sy towerstaf uit. “Davel! Shacklebolt! Kry hom!”

’n Silwer ligstraal flits deur die vertrek. Daar is ’n knal soos ’n gewerskoot en die vloer vibreer. ’n Hand gryp Harry agter die nek en slinger hom teen die vloer net toe ’n tweede silwer lig opvlam. Verskeie van die portrette skree. Fawkes kry en ’n wolk stof vul die lug sodat Harry begin hoes. Hy sien hoe ’n donker figuur die vloer voor hom tref. Daar is ’n kreet en ’n slag en iemand skree “Nee!” Toe volg die gekraak van brekende glas, benoude skuifelende voetstappe, ’n kreun . . . en stilte.

Harry draai sy kop met inspanning om te sien wie hom aan die nek beet het en sien dat professor McGonagall langs hom hurk. Sy het hom en Marietta uit die pad uit gedwing. Die vertrek is nog steeds vol stof en Harry hyg na asem terwyl hy ’n baie lang figuur sien nader kom.

“Is alles reg?” vra Dompeldorius.

“Ja!” Professor McGonagall staan op en sleep vir Harry en Marietta orent.

Die stof is besig om te gaan lê en die wrak van ’n kantoor raak sigbaar. Dompeldorius se lessenaar is onderstebo, al die speekbeen-tafeltjies is omgestamp en die silwer instrumente is stukkend. Broddelwerk, Umbridge, Kingsley en Davel lê roerloos op die vloer. Fawkes die feniks sweef in groot sirkels om hulle terwyl hy saggies sing.

“Ek moes ongelukkig vir Kingsley ook toor anders sou dit agterdog gewek het,” sê Dompeldorius sag. “Hy’t baie gou gesnap wat aangaan en juffrou Edgecombe se geheue aangepas toe almal weggekyk het – bedank hom asseblief namens my, Minerva.

“Nou ja, hulle sal nou-nou wakker word en dis beter dat hulle nie weet ons het gepraat nie. Maak asof geen tyd verbygegaan het nie, asof hulle bloot neergeslaan het, hulle sal nie onthou nie –”

“Waarheen gaan jy, Dompeldorius?” fluister professor McGonagall. “Grimmauldplein?”

“O nee.” Dompeldorius lag grimmig. “Ek gaan nie wegkruip nie. Broddelwerk sal binnekort wens hy’t my nooit uit Hogwarts verjaag nie – en dis ’n belofte.”

“Professor Dompeldorius . . .” begin Harry.

Hy weet nie wat om eerste te sê nie: hoe jammer hy is dat hy die DS begin het en al hierdie moeilikheid veroorsaak het, of hoe aaklig hy voel dat Dompeldorius moet weggaan om te verhoed dat hy geskors word. Maar Dompeldorius praat voor hy iets kan sê.

“Luister na my, Harry,” sê hy dringend. “Jy moet Okklumensie so

hard as wat jy kan, leer, verstaan jy my? Doen alles wat professor Snerp vir jou sê en pas dit veral toe wanneer jy saans gaan slaap sodat jy jou gedagtes teen daardie drome kan sluit. Jy sal binnekort verstaan hoekom, maar jy moet belowe –

Davel begin roer en Dompeldorius gryp Harry se pols.

“Onthou – sluit jou gedagtes –”

Toe Dompeldorius se vingers om Harry se arm vou, skiet ’n pyn deur sy litteken en hy ervaar weer daardie aaklige slangagtige begeerte om vir Dompeldorius te pik, te byt, seer te maak –

“– jy sal nog verstaan,” fluister Dompeldorius.

Fawkes swenk en swiep laag oor hom. Dompeldorius laat los vir Harry, lig sy hand en gryp die feniks se lang goue stert. Daar is ’n vlam van lig en hulle is weg.

“Waar is hy?” skree Broddelwerk en stoot homself orent. “Waar is hy?”

“Ek weet nie!” skree Kingsley en spring ook op.

“Wel, hy kon nie gedisappareer het nie!” skree Umbridge. “Jy kan dit nie in hierdie skool doen nie –”

“Die trappel!” Davel gooi sy gewig teen die deur, dwing dit oop en verdwyn met Kingsley en Umbridge op sy hakke. Broddelwerk aarsel. Dan staan hy stadig op en stof sy voorkant af. ’n Lang, pynlike stilte volg.

“Wel, Minerva,” sê Broddelwerk nydig terwyl hy sy geskeurde hempsmou regtrek. “Ek’s bevrees dis die einde van jou vriend Dompeldorius.”

“Jy dink so, nê?” sê professor McGonagall minagtend.

Dit lyk nie of Broddelwerk haar hoor nie. Hy kyk na die vernielde kantoor. ’n Paar van die portrette sis vir hom en een of twee maak ongeskikte handgebare.

“Neem daardie twee bed toe,” sê Broddelwerk met ’n neerhalende kopknik na Harry en Marietta.

Professor McGonagall sê niks, maar stuur vir Harry en Marietta na die deur. Toe dit agter hulle toegaan, hoor Harry Phineas Nigellus se stem.

“Weet jy, Minister, ek stem nie altyd met Dompeldorius saam nie, maar jy moet erken, hy het styl.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



SNAPE'S WORST MEMORY

— BY ORDER OF —

The Ministry of Magic

Dolores Jane Umbridge (High Inquisitor) has replaced Albus Dumbledore as Head of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

*The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number
Twenty-eight.*

Signed:

Cornelius Oswald Fudge
MINISTER OF MAGIC



The notices had gone up all over the school overnight, but they did not explain how every single person within the castle seemed to know that Dumbledore had overcome two Aurors, the High Inquisitor, the Minister of Magic, and his Junior Assistant to escape. No matter where Harry went within the castle next day, the sole topic of conversation was Dumbledore's flight, and though some of the details might have gone awry in the retelling (Harry overheard one second-year girl assuring another that Fudge was now lying in St. Mungo's with a pumpkin for a head), it was surprising how accurate the rest of their information was. Everybody seemed aware, for instance, that Harry and Marietta were the only students to have witnessed the scene in Dumbledore's office, and as Marietta was now in the hospital wing, Harry found himself besieged with requests to give a firsthand account wherever he went.

"Dumbledore will be back before long," said Ernie Macmillan confidently on the way back from Herbology after listening intently to Harry's story. "They couldn't keep him away in our second year and they won't be able to this time. The Fat Friar told me . . ." He dropped his voice conspiratorially, so that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had to lean closer to him to hear, ". . . that Umbridge tried to get back into his office last night after they'd searched the castle and grounds for him. Couldn't get past the gargoyle. The Head's office has sealed itself against her." Ernie smirked. "Apparently she had a right little

tantrum. . .”

“Oh, I expect she really fancied herself sitting up there in the Head’s office,” said Hermione viciously, as they walked up the stone steps into the entrance hall. “Lording it over all the other teachers, the stupid puffed-up, power-crazy old —”

“Now, do you *really* want to finish that sentence, Granger?”

Draco Malfoy had slid out from behind the door, followed by Crabbe and Goyle. His pale, pointed face was alight with malice.

“Afraid I’m going to have to dock a few points from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff,” he drawled.

“You can’t take points from fellow prefects, Malfoy,” said Ernie at once.

“I know *prefects* can’t dock points from each other,” sneered Malfoy; Crabbe and Goyle sniggered. “But members of the Inquisitorial Squad —”

“The *what*?” said Hermione sharply.

“The Inquisitorial Squad, Granger,” said Malfoy, pointing toward a tiny silver *I* upon his robes just beneath his prefect’s badge. “A select group of students who are supportive of the Ministry of Magic, hand-picked by Professor Umbridge. Anyway, members of the Inquisitorial Squad *do* have the power to dock points. . . . So, Granger, I’ll have five from you for being rude about our new headmistress. . . . Macmillan, five for contradicting me. . . . Five because I don’t like you, Potter. . . . Weasley, your shirt’s untucked, so I’ll have another five for that. . . . Oh yeah, I forgot, you’re a Mudblood, Granger, so ten for that. . . .”

Ron pulled out his wand, but Hermione pushed it away,

whispering, "Don't!"

"Wise move, Granger," breathed Malfoy. "New Head, new times . . . Be good now, Potty . . . Weasel King . . ."

He strode away, laughing heartily with Crabbe and Goyle.

"He was bluffing," said Ernie, looking appalled. "He can't be allowed to dock points . . . that would be ridiculous. . . . It would completely undermine the prefect system . . ."

But Harry, Ron, and Hermione had turned automatically toward the giant hourglasses set in niches along the wall behind them, which recorded the House points. Gryffindor and Ravenclaw had been neck and neck in the lead that morning. Even as they watched, stones flew upward, reducing the amounts in the lower bulbs. In fact, the only glass that seemed unchanged was the emerald-filled one of Slytherin.

"Noticed, have you?" said Fred's voice.

He and George had just come down the marble staircase and joined Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ernie in front of the hourglasses.

"Malfoy just docked us all about fifty points," said Harry furiously, as they watched several more stones fly upward from the Gryffindor hourglass.

"Yeah, Montague tried to do us during break," said George.

"What do you mean, 'tried'?" said Ron quickly.

"He never managed to get all the words out," said Fred, "due to the fact that we forced him headfirst into that Vanishing Cabinet on the first floor."

Hermione looked very shocked.

"But you'll get into terrible trouble!"

"Not until Montague reappears, and that could take weeks, I dunno

where we sent him,” said Fred coolly. “Anyway . . . we’ve decided we don’t care about getting into trouble anymore.”

“Have you ever?” asked Hermione.

“Course we have,” said George. “Never been expelled, have we?”

“We’ve always known where to draw the line,” said Fred.

“We might have put a toe across it occasionally,” said George.

“But we’ve always stopped short of causing real mayhem,” said Fred.

“But now?” said Ron tentatively.

“Well, now —” said George.

“— what with Dumbledore gone —” said Fred.

“— we reckon a bit of mayhem —” said George.

“— is exactly what our dear new Head deserves,” said Fred.

“You mustn’t!” whispered Hermione. “You really mustn’t! She’d love a reason to expel you!”

“You don’t get it, Hermione, do you?” said Fred, smiling at her. “We don’t care about staying anymore. We’d walk out right now if we weren’t determined to do our bit for Dumbledore first. So anyway,” he checked his watch, “phase one is about to begin. I’d get in the Great Hall for lunch if I were you, that way the teachers will see you can’t have had anything to do with it.”

“Anything to do with what?” said Hermione anxiously.

“You’ll see,” said George. “Run along, now.”

Fred and George turned away and disappeared in the swelling crowd descending the stairs toward lunch. Looking highly

disconcerted, Ernie muttered something about unfinished Transfiguration homework and scurried away.

"I think we *should* get out of here, you know," said Hermione nervously. "Just in case . . ."

"Yeah, all right," said Ron, and the three of them moved toward the doors to the Great Hall, but Harry had barely glimpsed today's ceiling of scudding white clouds when somebody tapped him on the shoulder and, turning, he found himself almost nose to nose with Filch, the caretaker. He took several hasty steps backward; Filch was best viewed at a distance.

"The headmistress would like to see you, Potter," he leered.

"I didn't do it," said Harry stupidly, thinking of whatever Fred and George were planning. Filch's jowls wobbled with silent laughter.

"Guilty conscience, eh?" he wheezed. "Follow me . . ."

Harry glanced back at Ron and Hermione, who were both looking worried. He shrugged and followed Filch back into the entrance hall, against the tide of hungry students.

Filch seemed to be in an extremely good mood; he hummed creakily under his breath as they climbed the marble staircase. As they reached the first landing he said, "Things are changing around here, Potter."

"I've noticed," said Harry coldly.

"Yerse . . . I've been telling Dumbledore for years and years he's too soft with you all," said Filch, chuckling nastily. "You filthy little beasts would never have dropped Stinkpellets if you'd known I had it in my power to whip you raw, would you, now? Nobody would have thought of throwing Fanged Frisbees down the corridors if I could've

strung you up by the ankles in my office, would they? But when Educational Decree Twenty-nine comes in, Potter, I'll be allowed to do them things. . . . *And* she's asked the Minister to sign an order for the expulsion of Peeves. . . . Oh, things are going to be very different around here with *her* in charge . . . ”

Umbridge had obviously gone to some lengths to get Filch on her side, Harry thought, and the worst of it was that he would probably prove an important weapon; his knowledge of the school's secret passageways and hiding places was probably second only to the Weasley twins.

“Here we are,” he said, leering down at Harry as he rapped three times upon Professor Umbridge's door and pushed it open. “The Potter boy to see you, ma'am.”

Umbridge's office, so very familiar to Harry from his many detentions, was the same as usual except for the large wooden block lying across the front of her desk on which golden letters spelled the word HEADMISTRESS; also his Firebolt, and Fred's and George's Cleansweeps, which he saw with a pang were now chained and padlocked to a stout iron peg in the wall behind the desk. Umbridge was sitting behind the desk, busily scribbling upon some of her pink parchment, but looked up and smiled widely at their entrance.

“Thank you, Argus,” she said sweetly.

“Not at all, ma'am, not at all,” said Filch, bowing as low as his rheumatism would permit, and exiting backward.

“Sit,” said Umbridge curtly, pointing toward a chair, and Harry sat. She continued to scribble for a few moments. He watched some of the foul kittens gamboling around the plates over her head.

wondering what fresh horror she had in store for him.

“Well now,” she said finally, setting down her quill and looking like a toad about to swallow a particularly juicy fly. “What would you like to drink?”

“What?” said Harry, quite sure he had misheard her.

“To drink, Mr. Potter,” she said, smiling still more widely. “Tea? Coffee? Pumpkin juice?”

As she named each drink, she gave her short wand a wave, and a cup or glass of it appeared upon her desk.

“Nothing, thank you,” said Harry.

“I wish you to have a drink with me,” she said, her voice becoming more dangerously sweet. “Choose one.”

“Fine . . . tea then,” said Harry, shrugging.

She got up and made quite a performance of adding milk with her back to him. She then bustled around the desk with it, smiling in sinisterly sweet fashion.

“There,” she said, handing it to him. “Drink it before it gets cold, won’t you? Well, now, Mr. Potter . . . I thought we ought to have a little chat, after the distressing events of last night.”

He said nothing. She settled herself back into her seat and waited. When several long moments had passed in silence, she said gaily, “You’re not drinking up!”

He raised the cup to his lips and then, just as suddenly, lowered it. One of the horrible painted kittens behind Umbridge had great round blue eyes just like Mad-Eye Moody’s magical one, and it had just occurred to Harry what Mad-Eye would say if he ever heard that Harry had drunk anything offered by a known enemy.

“What’s the matter?” said Umbridge, who was still watching him.

“Do you want sugar?”

“No,” said Harry.

He raised the cup to his lips again and pretended to take a sip, though keeping his mouth tightly closed. Umbridge’s smile widened.

“Good,” she whispered. “Very good. Now then . . .” She leaned forward a little. “*Where is Albus Dumbledore?*”

“No idea,” said Harry promptly.

“Drink up, drink up,” she said, still smiling. “Now, Mr. Potter, let us not play childish games. I know that you know where he has gone. You and Dumbledore have been in this together from the beginning. Consider your position, Mr. Potter . . .”

“I don’t know where he is.”

Harry pretended to drink again.

“Very well,” said Umbridge, looking displeased. “In that case, you will kindly tell me the whereabouts of Sirius Black.”

Harry’s stomach turned over and his hand holding the teacup shook so that the cup rattled in its saucer. He tilted the cup to his mouth with his lips pressed together, so that some of the hot liquid trickled down onto his robes.

“I don’t know,” he said a little too quickly.

“Mr. Potter,” said Umbridge, “let me remind you that it was I who almost caught the criminal Black in the Gryffindor fire in October. I know perfectly well it was you he was meeting and if I had had any proof neither of you would be at large today, I promise you. I repeat, Mr. Potter . . . Where is Sirius Black?”

“No idea,” said Harry loudly. “Haven’t got a clue.”

They stared at each other so long that Harry felt his eyes watering. Then she stood up.

“Very well, Potter, I will take your word for it this time, but be warned: The might of the Ministry stands behind me. All channels of communication in and out of this school are being monitored. A Floo Network Regulator is keeping watch over every fire in Hogwarts — except my own, of course. My Inquisitorial Squad is opening and reading all owl post entering and leaving the castle. And Mr. Filch is observing all secret passages in and out of the castle. If I find a shred of evidence . . .”

BOOM!

The very floor of the office shook; Umbridge slipped sideways, clutching her desk for support, looking shocked.

“What was — ?”

She was gazing toward the door; Harry took the opportunity to empty his almost full cup of tea into the nearest vase of dried flowers. He could hear people running and screaming several floors below.

“Back to lunch with you, Potter!” cried Umbridge, raising her wand and dashing out of the office. Harry gave her a few seconds’ start then hurried after her to see what the source of all the uproar was.

It was not difficult to find. One floor down, pandemonium reigned. Somebody (and Harry had a very shrewd idea who) had set off what seemed to be an enormous crate of enchanted fireworks.

Dragons comprised entirely of green-and-gold sparks were soaring up and down the corridors, emitting loud fiery blasts and

bangs as they went. Shocking-pink Catherine wheels five feet in diameter were whizzing lethally through the air like so many flying saucers. Rockets with long tails of brilliant silver stars were ricocheting off the walls. Sparklers were writing swearwords in midair of their own accord. Firecrackers were exploding like mines everywhere Harry looked, and instead of burning themselves out, fading from sight, or fizzling to a halt, these pyrotechnical miracles seemed to be gaining in energy and momentum the longer he watched.

Filch and Umbridge were standing, apparently transfixed with horror, halfway down the stairs. As Harry watched, one of the larger Catherine wheels seemed to decide that what it needed was more room to maneuver; it whirled toward Umbridge and Filch with a sinister *whoooooooooooo*. Both adults yelled with fright and ducked and it soared straight out of the window behind them and off across the grounds. Meanwhile, several of the dragons and a large purple bat that was smoking ominously took advantage of the open door at the end of the corridor to escape toward the second floor.

“Hurry, Filch, hurry!” shrieked Umbridge. “They’ll be all over the school unless we do something — *Stupefy!*”

A jet of red light shot out of the end of her wand and hit one of the rockets. Instead of freezing in midair, it exploded with such force that it blasted a hole in a painting of a soppy-looking witch in the middle of a meadow — she ran for it just in time, reappearing seconds later squashed into the painting next door, where a couple of wizards playing cards stood up hastily to make room for her.

“Don’t Stun them, Filch!” shouted Umbridge angrily, for all the world as though it had been his suggestion.

“Right you are, Headmistress!” wheezed Filch, who was a Squib and could no more have Stunned the fireworks than swallowed them. He dashed to a nearby cupboard, pulled out a broom, and began swatting at the fireworks in midair; within seconds the head of the broom was ablaze.

Harry had seen enough. Laughing, he ducked down low, ran to a door he knew was concealed behind a tapestry a little way along the corridor and slipped through it to find Fred and George hiding just behind it, listening to Umbridge’s and Filch’s yells and quaking with suppressed mirth.

“Impressive,” Harry said quietly, grinning. “Very impressive. You’ll put Dr. Filibuster out of business, no problem. . . .”

“Cheers,” whispered George, wiping tears of laughter from his face. “Oh, I hope she tries Vanishing them next. . . . They multiply by ten every time you try”

The fireworks continued to burn and to spread all over the school that afternoon. Though they caused plenty of disruption, particularly the firecrackers, the other teachers did not seem to mind them very much.

“Dear, dear,” said Professor McGonagall sardonically, as one of the dragons soared around her classroom, emitting loud bangs and exhaling flame. “Miss Brown, would you mind running along to the headmistress and informing her that we have an escaped firework in our classroom?”

The upshot of it all was that Professor Umbridge spent her first afternoon as headmistress running all over the school answering the summonses of the other teachers, none of whom seemed able to rid

their rooms of the fireworks without her. When the final bell rang and the students were heading back to Gryffindor Tower with their bags, Harry saw, with immense satisfaction, a disheveled and soot-blackened Umbridge tottering sweaty-faced from Professor Flitwick's classroom.

"Thank you so much, Professor!" said Professor Flitwick in his squeaky little voice. "I could have got rid of the sparklers myself, of course, but I wasn't sure whether I had the *authority* . . ."

Beaming, he closed his classroom door in her snarling face.

Fred and George were heroes that night in the Gryffindor common room. Even Hermione fought her way through the excited crowd around them to congratulate them.

"They were wonderful fireworks," she said admiringly.

"Thanks," said George, looking both surprised and pleased. "Weasleys' Wildfire Whiz-Bangs. Only thing is, we used our whole stock, we're going to have to start again from scratch now . . ."

"It was worth it, though," said Fred, who was taking orders from clamoring Gryffindors. "If you want to add your name to the waiting list, Hermione, it's five Galleons for your Basic Blaze box and twenty for the Deflagration Deluxe . . ."

Hermione returned to the table where Harry and Ron were sitting staring at their schoolbags as though hoping their homework might spring out of it and start doing itself.

"Oh, why don't we have a night off?" said Hermione brightly, as a silver-tailed Weasley rocket zoomed past the window. "After all, the Easter holidays start on Friday, we'll have plenty of time then . . ."

"Are you feeling all right?" Ron asked, staring at her in disbelief.

“Now you mention it,” said Hermione happily, “d’you know . . . I think I’m feeling a bit . . . *rebellious*.”

Harry could still hear the distant *bangs* of escaped firecrackers when he and Ron went up to bed an hour later, and as he got undressed a sparkler floated past the tower, still resolutely spelling out the word “POO”.

He got into bed, yawning. With his glasses off, the occasional firework still passing the window became blurred, looking like sparkling clouds, beautiful and mysterious against the black sky. He turned onto his side, wondering how Umbridge was feeling about her first day in Dumbledore’s job, and how Fudge would react when he heard that the school had spent most of the day in a state of advanced disruption. . . . Smiling to himself, he closed his eyes. . . .

The whizzes and bangs of escaped fireworks in the grounds seemed to be growing more distant . . . or perhaps he, Harry, was simply speeding away from them. . . .

He had fallen right into the corridor leading to the Department of Mysteries. He was speeding toward the plain black door. . . . *Let it open. . . . Let it open. . . .*

It did. He was inside the circular room lined with doors. . . . He crossed it, placed his hand upon an identical door, and it swung inward. . . .

Now he was in a long, rectangular room full of an odd, mechanical clicking. There were dancing flecks of light on the walls but he did not pause to investigate. . . . He had to go on. . . .

There was a door at the far end. . . . It too opened at his touch. . . . And now he was in a dimly lit room as high and wide as a church,

full of nothing but rows and rows of towering shelves, each laden with small, dusty, spun-glass spheres. . . . Now Harry's heart was beating fast with excitement. . . . He knew where to go. . . . He ran forward, but his footsteps made no noise in the enormous, deserted room. . . .

There was something in this room he wanted very, very much. . . .

Something he wanted. . . . or somebody else wanted. . . .

His scar was hurting. . . .

BANG! Harry awoke instantly, confused and angry. The dark dormitory was full of the sound of laughter.

"Cool!" said Seamus, who was silhouetted against the window. "I think one of those Catherine wheels hit a rocket and it's like they mated, come and see!"

Harry heard Ron and Dean scramble out of bed for a better look. He lay quite still and silent while the pain in his scar subsided and disappointment washed over him. He felt as though a wonderful treat had been snatched from him at the very last moment. . . . He had got so close that time. . . .

Glittering, pink-and-silver winged piglets were now soaring past the windows of Gryffindor Tower. Harry lay and listened to the appreciative whoops of Gryffindors in the dormitories below them. His stomach gave a sickening jolt as he remembered that he had Occlumency the following evening. . . .

Harry spent the whole of the next day dreading what Snape was going to say if he found out how much farther into the Department of Mysteries he had penetrated during his last dream. With a surge of

guilt he realized that he had not practiced Occlumency once since their last lesson. There had been too much going on since Dumbledore had left. He was sure he would not have been able to empty his mind even if he had tried. He doubted, however, whether Snape would accept that excuse.

He attempted a little last-minute practice during classes that day, but it was no good. Hermione kept asking him what was wrong whenever he fell silent trying to rid himself of all thought and emotion and, after all, the best moment to empty his brain was not while teachers were firing review questions at the class.

Resigned to the worst, he set off for Snape's office after dinner. Halfway across the entrance hall, however, Cho came hurrying up to him.

"Over here," said Harry, glad of a reason to postpone his meeting with Snape and beckoning her across to the corner of the entrance hall where the giant hourglasses stood. Gryffindor's was now almost empty. "Are you okay? Umbridge hasn't been asking you about the D.A., has she?"

"Oh no," said Cho hurriedly. "No, it was only . . . Well, I just wanted to say . . . Harry, I never dreamed Marietta would tell . . ."

"Yeah, well," said Harry moodily. He did feel Cho might have chosen her friends a bit more carefully. It was small consolation that the last he had heard, Marietta was still up in the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey had not been able to make the slightest improvement to her pimples.

"She's a lovely person really," said Cho. "She just made a mistake

Harry looked at her incredulously.

“*A lovely person who made a mistake?* She sold us all out, including you!”

“Well . . . we all got away, didn’t we?” said Cho pleadingly. “You know, her mum works for the Ministry, it’s really difficult for her —”

“Ron’s dad works for the Ministry too!” Harry said furiously. “And in case you hadn’t noticed, he hasn’t got ‘sneak’ written across *his* face —”

“That was a really horrible trick of Hermione Granger’s,” said Cho fiercely. “She should have told us she’d jinxed that list —”

“I think it was a brilliant idea,” said Harry coldly. Cho flushed and her eyes grew brighter.

“Oh yes, I forgot — of course, if it was darling *Hermione’s* idea —”

“Don’t start crying again,” said Harry warningly.

“I wasn’t going to!” she shouted.

“Yeah . . . well . . . good,” he said. “I’ve got enough to cope with at the moment.”

“Go and cope with it then!” she said furiously, turning on her heel and stalking off.

Fuming, Harry descended the stairs to Snape’s dungeon, and though he knew from experience how much easier it would be for Snape to penetrate his mind if he arrived angry and resentful, he succeeded in nothing but thinking of a few more good things he should have said to Cho about Marietta before reaching the dungeon door.

“You’re late, Potter,” said Snape coldly, as Harry closed the door.

behind him.

Snape was standing with his back to Harry, removing, as usual, certain of his thoughts and placing them carefully in Dumbledore's Pensieve. He dropped the last silvery strand into the stone basin and turned to face Harry.

"So," he said. "Have you been practicing?"

"Yes," Harry lied, looking carefully at one of the legs of Snape's desk.

"Well, we'll soon find out, won't we?" said Snape smoothly. "Wand out, Potter."

Harry moved into his usual position, facing Snape with the desk between them. His heart was pumping fast with anger at Cho and anxiety about how much Snape was about to extract from his mind.

"On the count of three then," said Snape lazily. "One — two —"

Snape's office door banged open and Draco Malfoy sped in.

"Professor Snape, sir — oh — sorry —"

Malfoy was looking at Snape and Harry in some surprise.

"It's all right, Draco," said Snape, lowering his wand. "Potter is here for a little Remedial Potions."

Harry had not seen Malfoy look so gleeful since Umbridge had turned up to inspect Hagrid.

"I didn't know," he said, leering at Harry, who knew his face was burning. He would have given a great deal to be able to shout the truth at Malfoy — or, even better, to hit him with a good curse.

"Well, Draco, what is it?" asked Snape.

"It's Professor Umbridge, sir — she needs your help," said

Malfoy: “They’ve found Montague, sir. He’s turned up jammed inside a toilet on the fourth floor.”

“How did he get in there?” demanded Snape.

“I don’t know, sir, he’s a bit confused . . .”

“Very well, very well — Potter,” said Snape, “we shall resume this lesson tomorrow evening instead.”

He turned and swept from his office. Malfoy mouthed “*Remedial Potions?*” at Harry behind Snape’s back before following him.

Seething, Harry replaced his wand inside his robes and made to leave the room. At least he had twenty-four more hours in which to practice; he knew he ought to feel grateful for the narrow escape, though it was hard that it came at the expense of Malfoy telling the whole school that he needed Remedial Potions. . . .

He was at the office door when he saw it: a patch of shivering light dancing on the door frame. He stopped, looking at it, reminded of something. . . . Then he remembered: It was a little like the lights he had seen in his dream last night, the lights in the second room he had walked through on his journey through the Department of Mysteries.

He turned around. The light was coming from the Pensieve sitting on Snape’s desk. The silver-white contents were ebbing and swirling within. Snape’s thoughts . . . things he did not want Harry to see if he broke through Snape’s defenses accidentally. . . .

Harry gazed at the Pensieve, curiosity welling inside him. . . . What was it that Snape was so keen to hide from Harry?

The silvery lights shivered on the wall. . . . Harry took two steps toward the desk, thinking hard. Could it possibly be information

about the Department of Mysteries that Snape was determined to keep from him?

Harry looked over his shoulder, his heart now pumping harder and faster than ever. How long would it take Snape to release Montague from the toilet? Would he come straight back to his office afterward, or accompany Montague to the hospital wing? Surely the latter . . . Montague was Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team, Snape would want to make sure he was all right.

Harry walked the remaining few feet to the Pensieve and stood over it, gazing into its depths. He hesitated, listening, then pulled out his wand again. The office and the corridor beyond were completely silent. He gave the contents of the Pensieve a small prod with the end of his wand.

The silvery stuff within began to swirl very fast. Harry leaned forward over it and saw that it had become transparent. He was, once again, looking down into a room as though through a circular window in the ceiling. . . . In fact, unless he was much mistaken, he was looking down upon the Great Hall. . . .

His breath was actually fogging the surface of Snape's thoughts. . . . His brain seemed to be in limbo. . . . It would be insane to do the thing that he was so strongly tempted to do . . . He was trembling. . . . Snape could be back at any moment . . . but Harry thought of Cho's anger, of Malfoy's jeering face, and a reckless daring seized him.

He took a great gulp of breath and plunged his face into the surface of Snape's thoughts. At once, the floor of the office lurched, tipping Harry headfirst into the Pensieve. . . .

He was falling through cold blackness, spinning furiously as he went, and then —

He was standing in the middle of the Great Hall, but the four House tables were gone. Instead there were more than a hundred smaller tables, all facing the same way, at each of which sat a student, head bent low, scribbling on a roll of parchment. The only sound was the scratching of quills and the occasional rustle as somebody adjusted their parchment. It was clearly exam time.

Sunshine was streaming through the high windows onto the bent heads, which shone chestnut and copper and gold in the bright light. Harry looked around carefully. Snape had to be here somewhere. This was *his* memory. . . .

And there he was, at a table right behind Harry. Harry stared. Snape-the-teenager had a stringy, pallid look about him, like a plant kept in the dark. His hair was lank and greasy and was flopping onto the table, his hooked nose barely half an inch from the surface of the parchment as he scribbled. Harry moved around behind Snape and read the heading of the examination paper:

DEFENSE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS — ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL

So Snape had to be fifteen or sixteen, around Harry's own age. His hand was flying across the parchment; he had written at least a foot more than his closest neighbors, and yet his writing was minuscule and cramped.

"Five more minutes!"

The voice made Harry jump; turning, he saw the top of Professor Flitwick's head moving between the desks a short distance away.

Professor Flitwick was walking past a boy with untidy black hair . . . very untidy black hair. . . .

Harry moved so quickly that, had he been solid, he would have knocked desks flying. Instead he seemed to slide, dreamlike, across two aisles and up a third. The back of the black-haired boy's head drew nearer and nearer. . . . He was straightening up now, putting down his quill, pulling his roll of parchment toward him so as to reread what he had written. . . .

Harry stopped in front of the desk and gazed down at his fifteen-year-old father.

Excitement exploded in the pit of his stomach. It was as though he was looking at himself but with deliberate mistakes. James's eyes were hazel, his nose was slightly longer than Harry's, and there was no scar on his forehead, but they had the same thin face, same mouth, same eyebrows. James's hair stuck up at the back exactly as Harry's did, his hands could have been Harry's, and Harry could tell that when James stood up, they would be within an inch of each other's heights.

James yawned hugely and rumped up his hair, making it even messier than it had been. Then, with a glance toward Professor Flitwick, he turned in his seat and grinned at a boy sitting four seats behind him.

With another shock of excitement, Harry saw Sirius give James the thumbs-up. Sirius was lounging in his chair at his ease, tilting it back on two legs. He was very good-looking; his dark hair fell into his eyes with a sort of casual elegance neither James's nor Harry's could ever have achieved, and a girl sitting behind him was eyeing him

hopefully, though he didn't seem to have noticed. And two seats along from this girl — Harry's stomach gave another pleasurable squirm — was Remus Lupin. He looked rather pale and peaky (was the full moon approaching?) and was absorbed in the exam. As he reread his answers, he scratched his chin with the end of his quill, frowning slightly.

So that meant Wormtail had to be around here somewhere too . . . and sure enough, Harry spotted him within seconds: a small, mousy-haired boy with a pointed nose. Wormtail looked anxious; he was chewing his fingernails, staring down at his paper, scuffing the ground with his toes. Every now and then he glanced hopefully at his neighbor's paper. Harry stared at Wormtail for a moment, then back at James, who was now doodling on a bit of scrap parchment. He had drawn a Snitch and was now tracing the letters L. E. What did they stand for?

“Quills down, please!” squeaked Professor Flitwick. “That means you too, Stebbins! Please remain seated while I collect your parchment! *Accio!*”

More than a hundred rolls of parchment zoomed into the air and into Professor Flitwick's outstretched arms, knocking him backward off his feet. Several people laughed. A couple of students at the front desks got up, took hold of Professor Flitwick beneath the elbows, and lifted him onto his feet again.

“Thank you . . . thank you,” panted Professor Flitwick. “Very well, everybody, you're free to go!”

Harry looked down at his father, who had hastily crossed out the L. E. he had been embellishing, jumped to his feet, stuffed his quill and

the exam question paper into his bag, which he slung over his back, and stood waiting for Sirius to join him.

Harry looked around and glimpsed Snape a short way away, moving between the tables toward the doors into the entrance hall, still absorbed in his own examination paper. Round-shouldered yet angular, he walked in a twitchy manner that recalled a spider, his oily hair swinging about his face.

A gang of chattering girls separated Snape from James and Sirius, and by planting himself in the midst of this group, Harry managed to keep Snape in sight while straining his ears to catch the voices of James and his friends.

“Did you like question ten, Moony?” asked Sirius as they emerged into the entrance hall.

“Loved it,” said Lupin briskly. ““Give five signs that identify the werewolf.” Excellent question.”

“D’you think you managed to get all the signs?” said James in tones of mock concern.

“Think I did,” said Lupin seriously, as they joined the crowd thronging around the front doors eager to get out into the sunlit grounds. “One: He’s sitting on my chair. Two: He’s wearing my clothes. Three: His name’s Remus Lupin . . .”

Wormtail was the only one who didn’t laugh.

“I got the snout shape, the pupils of the eyes, and the tufted tail,” he said anxiously, “but I couldn’t think what else —”

“How thick are you, Wormtail?” said James impatiently. “You run round with a werewolf once a month —”

“Keep your voice down,” implored Lupin.

Harry looked anxiously behind him again. Snape remained close by, still buried in his examination questions; but this was Snape's memory, and Harry was sure that if Snape chose to wander off in a different direction once outside in the grounds, he, Harry, would not be able to follow James any farther. To his intense relief, however, when James and his three friends strode off down the lawn toward the lake, Snape followed, still poring over the paper and apparently with no fixed idea of where he was going. By jogging a little ahead of him, Harry managed to maintain a close watch on James and the others.

"Well, I thought that paper was a piece of cake," he heard Sirius say. "I'll be surprised if I don't get Outstanding on it at least."

"Me too," said James. He put his hand in his pocket and took out a struggling Golden Snitch.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Nicked it," said James casually. He started playing with the Snitch, allowing it to fly as much as a foot away and seizing it again; his reflexes were excellent. Wormtail watched him in awe.

They stopped in the shade of the very same beech tree on the edge of the lake where Harry, Ron, and Hermione had spent a Sunday finishing their homework, and threw themselves down on the grass.

Harry looked over his shoulder yet again and saw, to his delight, that Snape had settled himself on the grass in the dense shadows of a clump of bushes. He was as deeply immersed in the O.W.L. paper as ever, which left Harry free to sit down on the grass between the beech and the bushes and watch the foursome under the tree.

The sunlight was dazzling on the smooth surface of the lake, on the

bank of which the group of laughing girls who had just left the Great Hall were sitting with shoes and socks off, cooling their feet in the water.

Lupin had pulled out a book and was reading. Sirius stared around at the students milling over the grass, looking rather haughty and bored, but very handsomely so. James was still playing with the Snitch, letting it zoom farther and farther away, almost escaping but always grabbed at the last second. Wormtail was watching him with his mouth open. Every time James made a particularly difficult catch, Wormtail gasped and applauded. After five minutes of this, Harry wondered why James didn't tell Wormtail to get a grip on himself, but James seemed to be enjoying the attention. Harry noticed his father had a habit of rumpling up his hair as though to make sure it did not get too tidy, and also that he kept looking over at the girls by the water's edge.

"Put that away, will you?" said Sirius finally, as James made a fine catch and Wormtail let out a cheer. "Before Wormtail wets himself from excitement."

Wormtail turned slightly pink but James grinned.

"If it bothers you," he said, stuffing the Snitch back in his pocket. Harry had the distinct impression that Sirius was the only one for whom James would have stopped showing off.

"I'm bored," said Sirius. "Wish it was full moon."

"You might," said Lupin darkly from behind his book. "We've still got Transfiguration, if you're bored you could test me . . . Here." He held out his book.

Sirius snorted. "I don't need to look at that rubbish, I know it all."

“This’ll liven you up, Padfoot,” said James quietly. “Look who it is . . .”

Sirius’s head turned. He had become very still, like a dog that has scented a rabbit.

“Excellent,” he said softly. “*Snivellus*.”

Harry turned to see what Sirius was looking at.

Snape was on his feet again, and was stowing the O.W.L. paper in his bag. As he emerged from the shadows of the bushes and set off across the grass, Sirius and James stood up. Lupin and Wormtail remained sitting. Lupin was still staring down at his book, though his eyes were not moving and a faint frown line had appeared between his eyebrows. Wormtail was looking from Sirius and James to Snape with a look of avid anticipation on his face.

“All right, Snivellus?” said James loudly.

Snape reacted so fast it was as though he had been expecting an attack. Dropping his bag, he plunged his hand inside his robes, and his wand was halfway into the air when James shouted, “*Expelliarmus!*”

Snape’s wand flew twelve feet into the air and fell with a little thud in the grass behind him. Sirius let out a bark of laughter.

“*Impedimenta!*” he said, pointing his wand at Snape, who was knocked off his feet, halfway through a dive toward his own fallen wand.

Students all around had turned to watch. Some of them had gotten to their feet and were edging nearer to watch. Some looked apprehensive, others entertained.

Snape lay panting on the ground. James and Sirius advanced on

him, wands up, James glancing over his shoulder at the girls at the water's edge as he went. Wormtail was on his feet now, watching hungrily, edging around Lupin to get a clearer view.

"How'd the exam go, Snivelly?" said James.

"I was watching him, his nose was touching the parchment," said Sirius viciously. "There'll be great grease marks all over it, they won't be able to read a word."

Several people watching laughed; Snape was clearly unpopular. Wormtail sniggered shrilly. Snape was trying to get up, but the jinx was still operating on him; he was struggling, as though bound by invisible ropes.

"You — wait," he panted, staring up at James with an expression of purest loathing. "You — wait . . ."

"Wait for what?" said Sirius coolly. "What're you going to do, Snivelly, wipe your nose on us?"

Snape let out a stream of mixed swearwords and hexes, but his wand being ten feet away nothing happened.

"Wash out your mouth," said James coldly. "*Scourgify!*"

Pink soap bubbles streamed from Snape's mouth at once; the froth was covering his lips, making him gag, choking him —

"Leave him ALONE!"

James and Sirius looked around. James's free hand jumped to his hair again.

It was one of the girls from the lake edge. She had thick, dark red hair that fell to her shoulders and startlingly green almond-shaped eyes — Harry's eyes.

Harry's mother . . .

“All right, Evans?” said James, and the tone of his voice was suddenly pleasant, deeper, more mature.

“Leave him alone,” Lily repeated. She was looking at James with every sign of great dislike. “What’s he done to you?”

“Well,” said James, appearing to deliberate the point, “it’s more the fact that he *exists*, if you know what I mean . . .”

Many of the surrounding watchers laughed, Sirius and Wormtail included, but Lupin, still apparently intent on his book, didn’t, and neither did Lily.

“You think you’re funny,” she said coldly. “But you’re just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him *alone*.”

“I will if you go out with me, Evans,” said James quickly. “Go on . . . Go out with me, and I’ll never lay a wand on old Snivelly again.”

Behind him, the Impediment Jinx was wearing off. Snape was beginning to inch toward his fallen wand, spitting out soapsuds as he crawled.

“I wouldn’t go out with you if it was a choice between you and the giant squid,” said Lily.

“Bad luck, Prongs,” said Sirius briskly, turning back to Snape. “OY!”

But too late; Snape had directed his wand straight at James; there was a flash of light and a gash appeared on the side of James’s face, spattering his robes with blood. James whirled about; a second flash of light later, Snape was hanging upside down in the air, his robes falling over his head to reveal skinny, pallid legs and a pair of grayish underpants.

Many people in the small crowd watching cheered. Sirius, James, and Wormtail roared with laughter.

Lily, whose furious expression had twitched for an instant as though she was going to smile, said, "Let him down!"

"Certainly," said James and he jerked his wand upward. Snape fell into a crumpled heap on the ground. Disentangling himself from his robes, he got quickly to his feet, wand up, but Sirius said, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" and Snape keeled over again at once, rigid as a board.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Lily shouted. She had her own wand out now. James and Sirius eyed it warily.

"Ah, Evans, don't make me hex you," said James earnestly.

"Take the curse off him, then!"

James sighed deeply, then turned to Snape and muttered the countercurse.

"There you go," he said, as Snape struggled to his feet again. "you're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus —"

"I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!"

Lily blinked. "Fine," she said coolly. "I won't bother in future. And I'd wash your pants if I were you, *Snivellus*."

"Apologize to Evans!" James roared at Snape, his wand pointed threateningly at him.

"I don't want *you* to make him apologize," Lily shouted, rounding on James. "You're as bad as he is . . ."

"What?" yelped James. "I'd NEVER call you a — you-know-what!"

"Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you've just got off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid

Snitch, walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can — I'm surprised your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat head on it. You make me SICK.”

She turned on her heel and hurried away.

“Evans!” James shouted after her, “Hey, EVANS!”

But she didn't look back.

“What is it with her?” said James, trying and failing to look as though this was a throwaway question of no real importance to him.

“Reading between the lines, I'd say she thinks you're a bit conceited, mate,” said Sirius.

“Right,” said James, who looked furious now, “right —”

There was another flash of light, and Snape was once again hanging upside down in the air.

“Who wants to see me take off Snivelly's pants?”

But whether James really did take off Snape's pants, Harry never found out. A hand had closed tight over his upper arm, closed with a pincerlike grip. Wincing, Harry looked around to see who had hold of him, and saw, with a thrill of horror, a fully grown, adult-sized Snape standing right beside him, white with rage.

“Having fun?”

Harry felt himself rising into the air. The summer's day evaporated around him, he was floating upward through icy blackness, Snape's hand still tight upon his upper arm. Then, with a swooping feeling as though he had turned head over heels in midair, his feet hit the stone floor of Snape's dungeon, and he was standing again beside the Pensieve on Snape's desk in the shadowy, present-day Potions master's study.

“So,” said Snape, gripping Harry’s arm so tightly Harry’s hand was starting to feel numb. “So . . . been enjoying yourself, Potter?”

“N-no . . .” said Harry, trying to free his arm.

It was scary: Snape’s lips were shaking, his face was white, his teeth were bared.

“Amusing man, your father, wasn’t he?” said Snape, shaking Harry so hard that his glasses slipped down his nose.

“I — didn’t —”

Snape threw Harry from him with all his might. Harry fell hard onto the dungeon floor.

“You will not tell anybody what you saw!” Snape bellowed.

“No,” said Harry, getting to his feet as far from Snape as he could. “No, of course I w —”

“Get out, get out, I don’t want to see you in this office ever again!”

And as Harry hurtled toward the door, a jar of dead cockroaches exploded over his head. He wrenched the door open and flew away up the corridor, stopping only when he had put three floors between himself and Snape. There he leaned against the wall, panting, and rubbing his bruised arm.

He had no desire at all to return to Gryffindor Tower so early, nor to tell Ron and Hermione what he had just seen. What was making Harry feel so horrified and unhappy was not being shouted at or having jars thrown at him — it was that he knew how it felt to be humiliated in the middle of a circle of onlookers, knew exactly how Snape had felt as his father had taunted him, and that judging from what he had just seen, his father had been every bit as arrogant as Snape had always told him.

Snerp se slegste herinnering

OP LAS VAN DIE MINISTERIE VIR TOWERKUNS

Dolores Jane Umbridge (Hoë Ondersoeker) het Albus Dompeldorius as skoolhoof van Hogwarts Skool vir Heksery en Towerkuns vervang.

*Bogenoemde is in ooreenstemming met Opvoedkundige Dekreet
Nommer Agt-en-twintig.*

Geteken: Cornelius Oswald Broddelwerk, Minister vir Towerkuns

Die kennisgewings het oornag oral in die skool verskyn, maar dit verklaar nie hoe almal in die kasteel weet dat Dompeldorius twee Aurors, die Hoë Ondersoeker, die Minister vir Towerkuns en sy junior assistent oorrompel en daarna ontsnap het nie. Net waar Harry gaan, word daar gepraat oor Dompeldorius se ontsnapping, en hoewel sommige besonderhede mettertyd 'n kinkel gekry het (Harry het gehoor hoe 'n tweedejaar vir haar maat vertel dat Broddelwerk in Sint Mungo is met 'n pampoenskop), is die res van die inligting verbasend akkuraat. So weet almal dat Harry en Marietta die enigste studente is wat die toneel in Dompeldorius se kantoor aanskou het, en aangesien Marietta nou in die siekeboek is, word Harry met vroeë bestoek.

"Dompeldorius sal wel weer terugkom," sê Ernie Macmillan selfversekerd terwyl hulle terugstap van Herbologie nadat hy aandagtig na Harry se storie geluister het. "Hulle kon hom nie in ons tweede jaar weghou nie en hulle sal dit ook nie nou regkry nie. Die Vet Monnik het vir my gesê –" hy laat sak sy stem geheimsinnig sodat Harry, Ron en Hermien moet nader leun om te kan hoor, "– Umbridge wou gisteraand ná hulle die kasteel en die terrein deursoek het na sy kantoor gaan, maar die klipdrakekop wou haar nie inlaat nie! Die skoolhoof se kantoor is verseël teen haar." Ernie grynslag. "Sy't glo byna 'n oorval gehad."

"Hm, sy't seker al gesien hoe sit sy in die skoolhoof se kantoor," sê Hermien venynig terwyl hulle met die kasteel se kliptrappe opstap na die ingangsportaal. "En hoe sy oor al die ander onderwysers gaan baasspeel, die onnosele, opgeblase, magshonger ou –"

"Gaan jy daardie sin klaarmaak, La Grange?"

Draco Malfoy glip van agter die voordeur uit, gevolg deur Krabbe en Goliat. Sy skerp, bleek gesig lyk snedig.

"Ek is bevrees ek sal 'n paar punte van Griffindor en Hoesenproes moet aftrek," sê hy dralend.

"Net die onderwysers kan huispunte aftrek, Malfoy," sê Ernie dadelik.

"En ons is ook prefekte, oukei!" snou Ron.

"Ek weet prefekte mag nie punte aftrek nie, Weselkoning," draal Malfoy en Krabbe en Goliat giggel. "Maar lede van die Onderzoektaakmag –"

"Die wat?" sê Hermien skerp.

"Die Onderzoektaakmag, La Grange." Malfoy wys na 'n klein silwer O op sy kleed net onder sy prefektenteken. "'n Groep studente wat die Ministerie vir Towerkuns ondersteun en persoonlik deur professor Umbridge uitgesoek is. Soos ek gesê het, lede van die Onderzoektaakmag het wel die gesag om punte af te trek. Dus, La Grange, jy verloor vyf punte omdat jy ons nuwe skoolhoof beledig het. Macmillan verloor vyf omdat hy teëgepraat het en vyf van jou, Potter, omdat ek nie van jou hou nie. Weasley se hemp hang uit – dis nog vyf. O ja, La Grange, ek het skoon vergeet, jy's 'n Modderbloeder, tien daarvoor."

Ron ruk sy towerstaf uit, maar Hermien fluister "Moenie!" en stoot dit weg.

"Slim skuif, La Grange," sis Malfoy. "Nuwe skoolhoof, nuwe tye Soet wees, Pottier, Weselkoning."

Hy lag uit sy maag en stap saam met Krabbe en Goliat weg.

"Hy bluf," sê Ernie verontwaardig. "Hy sal nie mag punte aftrek nie. Dis malligheid, dit sal die hele prefekstelsel ondermyn."

Maar Harry, Ron en Hermien stap reeds na die enorme uurglase wat die huispunte aandui in die nisse teen die muur agter hulle. Griffindor en Raweklou was vanoggend nog kop aan kop. Voor hul oë vlieg van die edelstene boontoe sodat daar heelwat minder onderin is. Die enigste uurglas wat nog glad nie verander het nie, is Slibberin se smaraggroene.

"Hm, dan het julle dit agtergekom?" sê Fred se stem.

Hy en George het so pas met die marmertrappe afgekom en kom staan voor die uurglase langs Harry-hulle.

“Malfoy het nou net amper vyftig punte afgetrek,” sê Harry ergerlik, net toe nog van die edelstene in die Griffindor-uurglas boontoe vlieg.

“Montague het dit pouse met ons probeer,” sê George.

“Wat bedoel jy met ‘probeer’?” vra Ron vinnig.

“Hy kon dit nie gou genoeg sê nie,” sê Fred, “want ons het hom kop eerste in daardie Verdwynkas op die eerste verdieping geboender.”

Hermien lyk uiters geskok.

“Maar julle gaan in die moeilikheid beland!”

“Eers as Montague terugkom – en dit kan weke vat, ek weet nie mooi waarheen ons hom gestuur het nie,” sê Fred kil. “In elk geval . . . ons het besluit ons gee nie meer om om in die moeilikheid kom nie.”

“Het julle al ooit?” vra Hermien.

“Natuurlik,” sê George. “Ons is dan nog nooit geskors nie!”

“Ons het nog altyd geweet hoe ver om te gaan,” sê Fred.

“Wel, ons het dalk soms ’n bietjie te ver gegaan,” sê George.

“Maar ons het nog nooit regtig amok gemaak nie,” sê Fred.

“En nou?” vra Ron huiwerig.

“Hm, nou –” sê George.

“– noudat Dompeldorius nie meer hier is nie –” sê Fred.

“– dink ons ’n bietjie amok –” sê George.

“– is net wat die nuwe skoolhoof verdien,” sê Fred.

“Maar julle moenie,” fluister Hermien. “Julle moet regtig nie! Sy soek ’n rede om julle te skors!”

Fred glimlag vir haar. “Jy’s ook maar toe, Hermien. Ons gee nie om of ons bly of gly nie. Ons sou nou uitstap as ons nie gevoel het ons moet eers iets doen om Dompeldorius te help nie. Nou ja,” hy kyk na sy horlosie, “fase een gaan nou-nou begin. As ek julle is, sorg ek dat ek in die Groot Saal kom vir middagete sodat die onderwysers kan sien julle het niks daarmee uit te waai nie.”

“Niks waarmee uit te waai nie?” vra Hermien bekommerd.

“Jy sal sien,” sê George. “Toe, weg is julle.”

Die tweeling draai om en verdwyn in die menigte wat met die trappe afkom vir middagete. Ernie prewel iets oor Transfigurasie-huiswerk wat nie klaar is nie en maak hom uit die voete.

“Ek dink ons moet liever padgee, hoor,” sê Hermien senuagtig. “Net ingeval . . .”

“Ja, kom,” sê Ron en hulle stap na die Groot Saal. Harry is skaars in die Saal toe iemand hom op die skouer tik. Hy draai om en bevind hom van aangesig tot aangesig met Fillis, die opsigter. Hy tree vinnig agteruit – Fillis moet lief nie van te naby gesien word nie.

“Die skoolhoof wil met jou praat, Potter,” sê Fillis.

“Dit was nie ek nie,” sê Harry dom, gedagtig aan Fred en George se planne.

Fillis lag geluidloos en sy keelvelle tril. “Skuldige gewete, hè?” sis hy. “Kom saam.”

Harry kyk na Ron en Hermien, wat bekommerd lyk. Hy haal net sy skouers op en vleg deur die stroom honger studente na die ingangsportaal.

Dit lyk of Fillis in ’n besonder goeie bui is. Hy neurie binnensmonds terwyl hulle met die marmertappe opstap boontoe. By die eerste trapportaal sê hy: “Dinge is aan die verander, Potter.”

“Ek kom so agter,” sê Harry kil.

“Ja . . . ek sê al jare lank vir Dompeldorius hy’s te sag met julle,” sê Fillis met ’n nare kekkellaggie. “Julle spul uitvaagsels sal nie staan en Stinkpille rondgooi as julle weet ek het die mag om julle te laat riemspring nie, nè? En niemand sal weer Getandê Frisbees in die gange rondsmyt as julle eers aan julle enkels in my kantoor gehang het nie. Sodra Opvoedkundige Dekreet Nommer Nege-en-twintig wet word, Potter, mag ek al daai goed doen . . . En sy’t die Minister gevra om ’n bevel te teken dat Nurks uitgeskop word. O, dinge gaan baie anders wees nou dat sy in bevel is . . .”

Harry kan sien dat Umbridge moeite gedoen het om Fillis aan haar kant te kry, en ongelukkig sal hy ’n gedugte wapen wees. Hy ken die skool se geheime gange en wegkruipplekke amper net so goed soos die Weasley-tweeling.

“Hier is ons,” sê Fillis. Hy loer na Harry terwyl hy drie keer aan professor Umbridge se deur klop voor hy dit oopstoot. “Die Potter-seun is hier om u te sien, mevrou.”

Ná die detensies wat Harry daar moes doen, ken hy Umbridge se kantoor baie goed. Dit lyk nog nes tevore, behalwe die groot houtbord op haar lessenaar waarop die woord SKOOLHOOF in goue letters staan. Sy Vuurslag en Fred en George se Wegveeg-besems is met kettings en slotte aan ’n dik ysterpen in die muur agter die lessenaar vasgemaak.

Umbridge sit agter die lessenaar en skryf op pienk perkament, maar sy kyk op en glimlag breed toe hulle instap.

“Dankie, Argus,” sê sy soet.

“Dis ’n plesier, mevrou, net ’n plesier,” sê Fillis en buig so laag as wat sy rumatiek hom toelaat voor hy uitstap.

“Sit,” sê Umbridge kortaf en wys na ’n stoel. Harry gaan sit. Sy skryf nog ’n rukkiet en Harry kyk na die walglike katjies op die borde bo haar kop en wonder watter nuwe ellende sy nou weer vir hom beplan.

"Nou ja," sê sy uiteindelik. Sy sit haar veerpen neer en staar na hom soos 'n padda na 'n besonder sappige vlieg. "Wat sal jy drink?"

"Ekskuus?" sê Harry, wat nie seker is dat hy reg gehoor het nie.

"Drink, meneer Potter," sê sy en glimlag nog breër. "Tee? Koffie? Pampoensap?"

Sy waai haar towerstaf met elke woord en 'n koppie of beker of glas verskyn op die tafel.

"Niks nie, dankie," sê Harry.

"Ek wil hê jy moet iets saam met my drink," sê sy, haar stem gevaarlik vriendelik. "Kies iets."

Harry haal sy skouers op. "Goed dan . . . tee."

Sy staan op, draai haar rug na hom en gooi vir hom melk by. Dan stommel sy met 'n soet glimlaggie om die lessenaar.

"Hier," sê sy en gee dit vir hom aan. "Drink dit voor dit koud word. Nou, meneer Potter . . . ek het gedink ons moet 'n bietjie gesels ná die ontstellende dinge wat gisteraand gebeur het."

Harry sê niks. Umbridge sit terug in haar stoel en wag. Ná 'n paar minute in stilte verbygegaan het, sê sy verwyttend: "Jy drink nie jou tee nie!"

Harry bring die koppie na sy lippe en laat dit net so skielik weer sak. Een van die geverfde katjies agter Umbridge se groot blou oë het hom aan Maloog Moodie se toweroog laat dink, en skielik wonder hy wat Maloog sal sê as hy moet weet Harry het iets gedrink wat 'n bewese vyand vir hom gegee het.

"Is alles reg?" vra Umbridge, wat hom nog steeds stip dophou. "Wil jy suiker hê?"

"Nee," sê Harry.

Hy lig weer die koppie en maak of hy sluk, maar hy hou sy mond toe. Umbridge glimlag breër.

"Mooi," fluister sy. "Baie mooi. Nou . . ." Sy leun nader. "Waar is Albus Dompeldorius?"

"Ek weet nie," sê Harry dadelik.

"Drink gerus jou tee klaar," sê sy glimlaggend. "Nou, meneer Potter, moenie dat ons kinderagtige speletjies speel nie. Ek weet jy weet waar hy is. Jy en Dompeldorius was nog altyd kop in een mus. Dink aan jou posisie, meneer Potter . . ."

"Ek weet nie waar hy is nie," herhaal Harry en maak weer of hy drink.

Sy staar stip na hom. "Goed dan," sê sy, maar sy lyk ontevrede. "In daardie geval kan jy vir my sê waar Sirius Swardt is."

Harry se maag draai en sy hand bewe so dat die koppie op die

piering rinkel. Hy hou die koppie skuins teen sy mond met sy lippe teen mekaar en voel hoe van die warm vloeistof op sy kleed stort.

“Ek weet nie,” sê hy ’n bietjie te vinnig.

“Meneer Potter,” sê Umbridge sag, “mag ek jou daaraan herinner dat ek die misdadiger Swardt so amper in die Griffindor-vuur gevang het? Ek weet baie goed dat hy jou kom sien het en ek verseker jou: as ek enige bewyse gehad het, was nóg jy nóg hy nou op vrye voet. Ek herhaal, meneer Potter, waar is Sirius Swardt?”

“Ek weet nie,” sê Harry hard. “Hoe moet ek miskien weet?”

Hulle staar so lank na mekaar dat Harry se oë begin traan. Dan staan Umbridge op.

“Goed, Potter, voorlopig sal ek jou woord aanvaar. Maar wees gewaarsku: die Ministerie steun my. Alle kanale van kommunikasie na en van die skool word dopgehou. ’n Floo-netwerkreguleerder hou elke vuur in die Floo-netwerk dop – behalwe natuurlik myne. ’n Onderzoektaakmag is aangestel om alle uilepos wat die kasteel binnekom of verlaat te lees. En meneer Fillis hou ’n oë oor alle geheime tonnells na en van die kasteel. As ek die geringste bewys kry . . .”

BOEM!

Die kantoor se vloer skud. Umbridge struikel en gryp na haar lessenaar. Sy lyk geskok.

“Wat was dit –?”

Sy staar na die deur. Harry gebruik die geleentheid om sy teekopie, wat nog feitlik vol is, in die naaste pot gedroogde blomme om te keer. Hy hoor mense op die onderste verdiepings hardloop en skree.

“Gaan eet jou middagete, Potter!” skree Umbridge. Sy gryp haar towerstaf en storm uit die kantoor. Harry gee haar ’n rukkie kans voor hy haar volg.

Dis nie moeilik om die oorsaak van die ontploffing te kry nie. Chaos heers op die verdieping net onder Umbridge se kantoor. Iemand (Harry kan raai wie) het ’n enorme krat vol towervuurwerke aan die brand gestee.

Drake bestaande uit groen en goue vonke wat vuur spoeg en harde knalle los, vlieg op en af in die gange. Skokpienk vuurwiele, een en ’n half meter breed, zoem soos vlieënde pierings deur die lug. Vuurpyle met lang silwer sterte bots teen die mure en spat weg dat die sterre staan. Vonkelende vloekwoorde verskyn oral in die lug, en net waar Harry kyk, ontplof klappers. Eienaardig genoeg brand die vuurwerke nie uit of gaan dood nie, dis of hulle erger word hoe langer hulle brand.

Fillis en Umbridge staan halfpad af met die trappe en kyk ver-

steen van walging. Een van die vuurwiele pyl met 'n dreigende "whewwwwww" op hulle af. Hulle skree en koes verskrik en dit seil deur die venster agter hulle en oor die terrein. Intussen neem verskeie drake en 'n groot pers vlermuis hul kans waar en vlug deur 'n oop deur na die tweede verdieping.

"Maak gou, Fillis, maak gou!" gil Umbridge. "Ons moet iets doen voor hulle die hele skool vol is – *Bedwelm!*"

'n Straal rooi lig skiet uit haar towerstaf se punt en tref een van die vuurpyle. Maar dit vries nie in die lug nie. Dit bars oop en blaas 'n gat in 'n skildery van 'n soetlike heks wat in die middel van 'n weiveld staan. Sy gee net betyds pad na die portret langsaan waar 'n paar towenaars sit en kaart speel. Hulle staan vinnig op om vir haar plek te maak.

"Moet hulle nie *Bedwelm* nie, Fillis!" skel Umbridge asof dit hy was wat die towerspreuk uitgespreek het.

"Reg so, mevrou!" krys Fillis, wat 'n Sisser is en net so min die vuurwerke kan *Bedwelm* as hulle insluk. Hy storm na die naaste kas, haal 'n besem uit en begin om na die vuurwerke in die lug te klap. Die besem slaan dadelik aan die brand.

Harry het genoeg gesien. Hy koes laggend weg en hardloop in die gang af na 'n versteekte uitgang agter 'n tapisserie. Hy glip daardeur en kry vir Fred en George. Hulle kruip agter die tapisserie weg en verkneukel hulle in Umbridge en Fillis se benoude krete.

"Indrukwekkend." Harry grinnik. "Baie indrukwekkend" julle sal vir Derwisj & Boems lag-lag sonder besigheid laat sit.

"Gesondheid!" George vee die trane van sy gesig af. "Ek wens net sy wil probeer om hulle te laat Verdwyn" dit laat alles met tien vermeerder!"

Die vuurwerke versprei soos blits deur die skool. Hoewel hulle alles en almal ontwig, veral die klappers, lyk dit nie of die ander onderwysers baie omgee nie.

"O goeiste," sê professor McGonagall sardonies toe een van die vuurspuwende drake sissend en knallend deur haar klaskamer seil. "Juffrou Braun, gaan sê tog vir die skoolhoof daars 'n ontsnapte vuurwerk in ons klas."

Die gevolg is dat Umbridge op haar eerste dag as skoolhoof heen en weer deur die skool hardloop om van al die vuurwerke ontslae te raak, aangesien nie een van die ander onderwysers dit skynbaar sonder haar hulp kan doen nie. Toe die laaste klok lui en Harry hulle na die Griffindor-toring terugstap, sien hy tot sy groot plesier hoe 'n verwaaide en roetbesmeerde Umbridge met 'n natgeswete gesig uit professor Flickerpitt se klaskamer steier.

“Baie dankie, Professor!” sê professor Flickerpitt in sy piepstemmetjie. “Ek sou dit seker self kon doen, maar ek was nie seker of ek die nodige gesag het nie.”

Hy straal terwyl hy sy klaskamerdeur voor haar snydende gesig toemaak.

Daardie aand word Fred en George soos helde in die Griffindor-geselskamer behandel. Selfs Hermien stoot ’n pad deur die studente oop om hulle geluk te wens.

“Daardie vuurwerke was ongelooflik,” sê sy bewonderend.

George lyk tegelyk verbaas en in sy skik. “Dankie. Dis die Weasley-vuurspoegers. Al probleem is dat ons voorraad nou op is, ons sal weer voor moet begin.”

“Maar dit was dit werd,” sê Fred, wat besig is om bestellings te neem. “As jy jou naam op die waglys wil sit, Hermien, dis vyf Galjoene vir ’n Basiese Blitsboks en twintig vir die Vulkaniese Vurkblitse . . .”

Hermien stap terug na die tafel waar Harry en Ron na hul skool-sakke sit en kyk asof hulle wens hul huiswerk sal op ’n manier van-sell klaarkom.

“Hoekom vat ons nie die aand af nie?” sê Hermien net toe ’n Weasley-vuurpyl verby die venster gons. “Ek bedoel, die Paasvakansie begin Vrydag. Ons sal dan hope tyd hê.”

Ron staar ongelowig na haar. “Voel jy sleg of iets?”

“Nee, weet jy,” sê Hermien gelukkig, “ek voel ’n bietjie rebels.”

Harry hoor nog steeds klappers in die verte toe hy en Ron ’n uur later bed toe gaan en terwyl hulle uitrek, suis ’n reeks vonke wat “POEF” spel verby die toring.

Harry klouter gaap-gaap in die bed. Sonder sy bril lyk die vuurwerke wat kort-kort voor die venster verbyskiet soos geheimsinnige glimmende wolke teen die donker hemel. Hy draai op sy sy. Hy wonder hoe Umbridge ná haar eerste dag as Dompeldorius se plaasvervanger voel. En wat gaan Broddelwerk doen as hy moet hoor die skool was die hele dag in ’n chaotiese toestand? Harry glimlag en maak sy oë toe . . .

Die ontploffings en knalle van die ontsnapte vuurwerke oor die terrein word dowwer in die verte . . . of dalk is dit hy wat besig is om weg te skiet . . .

Hy val in die gang wat na die Departement vir Geheime lei. Hy hardloop na die eenvoudige swart deur. . . Laat dit oopgaan . . . laat dit oopgaan.

Dis oop. Hy is in die ronde vertrek met die baie deure . . . hy stap

deur die kamer, sit sy hand op 'n identiese deur . . . en dit swaai na binne oop . . .

Hy bevind hom in 'n langwerpige vertrek vol vreemde meganiese klinkgeluide. Daar is dansende ligvlekke teen die mure, maar hy staan nie stil om daarna te kyk nie . . . hy moet verder gaan . . .

Daar is 'n deur aan die verste end . . . dit gaan oop toe hy daaraan raak . . .

Hy is nou in 'n dofverligte vertrek so hoog en breed soos 'n kerk, met rye en rye rakke vol stowwerige glasballe . . . Harry se hart klop vinnig van opgewondenheid . . . hy weet nou waarheen om te gaan . . . hy hardloop vorentoe, maar sy voetstappe maak geen geluid in die enorme leë vertrek nie . . .

Daar is iets in hierdie kamer wat hy baie, baie graag wil hê . . . iets wat hy wil hê . . . of wat iemand anders wil hê . . .

Sy litteken pyn . . .
BOEM!

Harry word onmiddellik wakker, deurmekaar en kwaad! Die donker slaapsaal weergalm met gelag . . .

"Cool!" sê Septimus, afgeteken voor die venster. "Een van die vuurwiele het met 'n vuurpyl gebots en nou's dit of hulle gepaar het, kom kyk!"

Harry hoor hoe Ron en Dean uit die bed klouter en nader draf. Hy lê doodstil en wag dat die pyn in sy litteken moet bedaar. Teleurstelling spoel oor hom. Dis of 'n wonderlike verrassing op die laaste oomblik van hom gesteel is . . . hy was só amper daar . . .

Glinsterende gevleuelde pienk en silwer varkies vlieg verby die Griffindor-toring se vensters. Harry lê en luister hoe die res van die Griffindors in die slaapsale onder hulle s'n waarderend skree en sy maag draai by die gedagte aan sy Okklumensie-les die volgende aand . . .

Die hele volgende dag bekommer Harry hom oor wat Snerp gaan sê as hy moet agterkom hoe diep Harry die Departement vir Geheime binnegedring het tydens sy laaste droom. Hy voel skuldig omdat hy ná die vorige les nog niks geoefen het nie. Daar het net te veel gebeur sedert Dompeldorius weg is en hy glo nie hy sal sy verstand kan leegmaak nie, al probeer hy ook hoe hard. Maar dis te betwyfel of Snerp hierdie verskoning sal aanvaar . . .

Hy probeer om in klastyd te oefen, maar dit werk nie. Nes hy sy gedagtes en emosies probeer opsy skuif en stil word, vra Hermien vir hom wat verkeerd is. Dis ook nie 'n goeie idee om jou brein leeg te maak terwyl die onderwysers die klas met hersieningsvrae bestook nie . . .

Harry is voorbereid op die ergste toe hy ná aandete na Snerp se kantoor stap. Hy is in die middel van die ingangsportaal toe Cho na hom toe aangehardloop kom.

"Hier," sê Harry, wat enigiets sal doen om sy les met Snerp te vertraag. Hy beduie na die hoek met die enorme uurglase. Griffindor s'n is al amper leeg. "Is jy oukei? Het Umbridge jou oor die DS uitgevra?"

"Nee," sê Cho gejaag. "Nee, dis net . . . wel, ek wou net sê Harry, ek het nooit kon droom dat Marietta ons sou verklik nie . . ."

"Ja, wel," sê Harry vies. Hy voel regtig dat Cho haar vriende beter kon gekies het. Dis 'n skrale troos dat Marietta nog steeds in die siekeboeg is en dat Madame Pomfrey nog niks met haar puisies kon uitrig nie.

"Sy's eintlik verskriklik oulik," sê Cho. "Sy't net 'n fout gemaak –"

Harry gaap haar ongelowig aan.

"Sy's verskriklik oulik en sy't 'n fout gemaak? Sy het ons almal ver-raai, vir jou ook!"

"Wel . . . ons het darem almal weggekom," sê Cho smekend. "Jy weet, haar ma werk by die Ministerie, dis baie moeilik vir haar –"

"Ron se pa werk ook by die Ministerie!" sê Harry verontwaardig. "En ingeval jy nie agtergekom het nie, daar staan nie KLIKBEK op sy gesig geskryf –"

"Dit was gemeen van daardie Hermien la Grange," sê Cho kwaai. "Sy kon vir ons gesê het sy't daardie lys getoor –"

"Ek dink dit was 'n briljante idee," sê Harry koud.

Cho word rooi en haar oë blink. "O ja, hoe kon ek vergeet het, dit was mos *lieuwe Hermien se* idee –"

"Moet net nie weer begin huil nie," keer Harry.

"Ek was nie van plan nie!" gil sy.

"Oukei . . . wel, dan's ek bly. Ek het genoeg om op die oomblik te hanteer."

"Gaan hanteer dit dan!" snou Cho en stap met lang tree weg.

Harry is smoorkwaad toe hy die trappe afstap na Snerp se kerker. Hoewel hy uit bitter ervaring weet dis vir Snerp baie makliker om sy brein binne te dring as hy kwaad is, dink hy op die oomblik aan niks anders as wat hy nog vir Cho oor Marietta moes gesê het nie.

"Jy is laat, Potter," sê Snerp koud toe Harry die deur agter hom toestoot.

Hy staan met sy rug na Harry en sit van sy gedagtes soos gewoonlik versigtig in Dompeldorius se Peinssif. Hy laat val die laaste silwer draad in die klipbak en kyk op.

“So,” sê hy. “Het jy geoefen?”

“Ja,” lieg Harry en staar na die pote van Snerp se lessenaar.

“Ons sal gou weet. Towerstaf gereed, Potter.”

Harry gaan staan op sy gewone plek oorkant Snerp, met die lessenaar tussen hulle. Sy hart klop woens van ontsteltenis oor. Ho en kommer oor wat Snerp uit sy gedagtes gaan haal.

“Ek tel drie,” sê Snerp stadig. “Een – twee – ”

Die kantoordeur vlieg oop en Draco Malfoy storm in.

“Professor Snerp, ek – o – jammer – ”

Malfoy kyk verbaas na Snerp en Harry.

“Dis alles reg, Draco.” Snerp laat sak sy towerstaf. “Potter is hier vir ekstra Towerdrankies.”

Harry het laas vir Malfoy so in sy noppies sien lyk toe Umbridge vir Hagrid kom inspekteer het.

“O, ek het nie geweet nie,” sê hy en staar na Harry, wie se gesig brand. Hy sou wat wou gee om die waarheid uit te skree – nee, nog beter, om vir Malfoy met 'n sterk paljas te toor.

“Wel, Draco, wat is dit?” vra Snerp.

“Dis professor Umbridge, meneer – sy't jou hulp nodig. Hulle het vir Montague gekry. Hy sit vas in 'n toilet op die vierde verdieping.”

“Hoe't hy dit reggekry?” vra Snerp.

“Ek weet nie, meneer, hy's 'n bietjie deurmekaar.”

“Goed, ek kom,” sê Snerp. “Potter, ons sal môre met die les voortgaan.”

Hy tol om en swiep uit die kantoor. Malfoy prewel honend “Ekstra Towerdrankies?” agter Snerp se rug voor hy hom volg.

Harry is briesend kwaad toe hy sy towerstaf in sy kleed steek en regmaak om uit te stap. Hy weet hy moet eintlik dankbaar wees oor dié noue ontkoming. Ten minste het hy nou vier-en-twintig uur om te oefen. Net jammer dat Malfoy vir die hele skool gaan vertel dat hy ekstra Towerdrankies nodig het.

Hy is by die kantoor se deur toe hy dit sien: 'n bewende silwer ligkol wat teen die kosyn dans. Hy steek vas en kyk daarna. Dit herinner hom aan iets . . . dan weet hy: die ligte wat hy die vorige aand in sy droom gesien het, die ligte in die tweede vertrek van die Departement vir Geheime.

Hy draai om. Die lig kom uit die Peinssif op Snerp se lessenaar. Die silwerwit inhoud dein op en neer. Snerp se gedagtes . . . dinge wat hy nie wil hê Harry moet sien nie, sou Harry per ongeluk deur sy verdediging breek . . .

Harry staar na die Peinssif. Nuuskierigheid wel in hom op wat is in daardie Peinssif wat Snerp wil wegsteek?

Harry loer oor sy skouer terwyl sy hart hard en vinnig klop. Hoe lank gaan dit vir Snerp neem om vir Montague uit die toilet te kry? Sal hy dadelik terugkom na sy kantoor, of eerder saam met Montague na die siekeboeg gaan? Hy sal seker saamgaan. Montague is die kaptein van Slibberin se Kwiddiekspan, Snerp sal wil seker maak dat alles reg is.

Harry gee die paar tree tot by die Peinssif, buk nader en staar daarin af. Hy aarsel, luister eers weer en haal dan sy towerstaf uit. Die kantoor en die gang is doodstil. Hy tik die Peinssif se inhoud met sy towerstaf se punt.

Die silwer stof begin vinnig draai. Harry leun nader en sien hoe dit deurskynend word. Hy kyk deur 'n ronde venster in die plafon van 'n vertrek . . . dit lyk soos die Groot Saal.

Sy asem maak wasem op die oppervlak van Snerp se gedagtes. Sy brein staan stil . . . dis so gevaarlik om dit te doen, maar die ver-
soeking is baie groot . . . hy bewe . . . Snerp kan enige oomblik terugkom . . . maar Harry onthou Cho se woede en Malfoy se snedige gesig en 'n roekeloosheid pak hom beet.

Hy trek sy asem diep in en laat sak sy gesig in Snerp se gedagtes. Die kantoor se vloer beweeg en gooi Harry kop eerste in die Peinssif.

Hy val deur koue duisternis . . . hy tol in die rondte, en toe –

Hy staan in die middel van die Groot Saal, maar die vier huis-tafels is weg en daar staan omtrent 'n honderd kleiner tafels netjies in rye. By elkeen sit 'n student kop omlaag en skryf op 'n stuk perkament. Die enigste geluid is die gekrap van veerpenne en die ritseling wanneer iemand 'n stuk perkament rondskuif. Dis eksamen.

Sonlig stroom deur die hoë vensters op die geboë koppe wat kastajngbruin en koper en goud in die helder lig blink. Harry kyk om hom rond. Snerp moet hier iewers wees . . . dis sy herinneringe.

Daar sit hy by 'n tafel agter Harry. Harry staar na hom. Snerp-die-tiener lyk rankerig en bleek, soos 'n plant wat in die donker groei. Sy hare is steil en olierig en hang tot op die tafel, sy haakneus raak amper aan sy perkament. Harry stap tot agter Snerp en lees die eksamenvraestel se opskrif: VERDEDIGING TEEN DIE DONKER KUNSTE – GEWONE TOWERVLAK.

Snerp moet omtrent vyftien of sestien wees, ongeveer Harry se ouderdom. Sy hand vlieg oor die perkament. Hy het al baie meer as die mense langs hom geskryf en hy skryf boonop klein.

“Nog vyf minute!”

Die stem laat Harry wip. Hy draai om en sien professor Flicker-

pitt se kop 'n entjie verder tussen die rye uitsteek. Professor Flickerpitt stap verby 'n seun met slordige swart hare . . . baie slordige swart hare

Harry stap só vinnig dat as hy solied was, hy die tafels sou omstamp. Asof in 'n droom sweef hy oor twee paadjies en met 'n derde op. Die donkerkopseun se agterkop kom nader . . . hy sit regop, sit sy veerpen neer, en trek sy rol perkament nader om te lees wat daarop staan . . .

Harry gaan staan voor die bank en staar na sy vyftienjarige pa. Hy wil bars van opgewondenheid: dis of hy homself sien, maar met opsetlike foute. James se oë is neutbruin, sy neus is effens langer as Harry s'n en daar is nie 'n litteken op sy voorkop nie. Maar hulle het dieselfde smal gesig, dieselfde mond, dieselfde wenkbroue. James se hare staan ook agter op nes Harry s'n, sy hande kon Harry s'n gewees het en Harry kan sien dat as James opstaan, hulle feitlik ewe lank sal wees.

James gaap groot en vryf sy hare sodat dit nog deurmekaarder is. Hy loer vlugtig na professor Flickerpitt, draai om in sy stoel en grinnik vir 'n seun vier plekke agter hom.

Met nog 'n rilling van opwinding sien Harry hoe Sirius sy duim vir James lig. Sirius lê terug op sy stoel en ry op die agterpote. Hy is baie aantreklik. Sy donker hare hang in sy oë met 'n ongeërgde elegansie wat James of Harry hom nooit sal kan nadoen nie. Die meisie agter hom kyk hoopvol op, maar dit lyk nie of hy haar eens raak sien nie. Twee plekke van haar af – Harry se maag gee nog 'n plesierige draai – sit Remus Lupin. Hy lyk bleek en afgerem (sou dit amper volmaan wees?) en sy aandag is by sy vraestel: hy krap sy ken met sy veerpen terwyl hy sy antwoorde fronsend lees.

Dit beteken Wurmstert moet ook hier iewers wees . . . en sowaar, daar sien Harry hom sit: 'n kleinerige seun met muisvaal hare en 'n skerp neus. Wurmstert lyk benoud: hy kou sy naels, staar na sy vraestel en skuifel sy voete rond. Hy loer elke nou en dan hoopvol na die mense om hom se vraestelle. Harry kyk 'n rukkie na Wurmstert en toe weer terug na James, wat op 'n stukkie perkament sit en krap. Hy het 'n Snip geteken en is nou besig om die letters "L.E." te skryf. Waarvoor sou dit staan?

"Sit julle veerpenne neer, asseblief!" piep professor Flickerpitt. "Jy ook, Stebbins! Bly asseblief sit terwyl ek julle perkamente inneem! Accio!"

Meer as 'n honderd rolle perkament seil deur die lug na professor Flickerpitt se uitgestrekte arms en stamp hom onderstebo. Verskeie mense lag. 'n Paar van die studente wat voor sit, spring op, gryp professor Flickerpitt se elmboë en lig hom terug op sy voete.

“Dankie . . . dankie,” hyg professor Flickerpitt. “Nou ja, julle kan gaan!”

Harry kyk na sy pa wat die “L.E.” wat hy versier het vinnig doodkrap voor hy opspring en sy veerpen en vraestel in sy skoolsak steek. Hy swaai sy sak oor sy skouer en wag vir Sirius.

Harry kyk om en sien vir Snerp ’n entjie daarvandaan tussen die tafels deur beweeg op pad na die ingangsportaal. Hy is nog steeds verdiep in sy vraestel. Hoewel hy hoekig lyk, het hy ronde skouers en hy stap op ’n rukkerige manier sodat sy vetterige hare om sy kop wip.

Daar is nou ’n groep giggelende meisies tussen James, Sirius, Lupin en Snerp. Harry sorg dat hy tussen hulle is sodat hy vir Snerp kan sien en terselfdertyd kan hoor wat James en sy vriende sê.

“Hoe’t jy van vraag tien gehou, Maantjie?” vra Sirius toe hulle in die ingangsportaal kom.

“Mal daaroor,” sê Lupin dadelik. “Gee vyf maniere om ’n weerwolf uit te ken. Uitstekende vraag.”

“Kon jy dit darem doen?” vra James kamma besorg.

“Dink so,” sê Lupin ernstig terwyl hulle by die studente aansluit wat deur die voordeure na die sonnige terrein stroom. “Een: hy sit op my stoel. Twee: hy’t my klere aan. Drie: sy naam is Remus Lupin.”

Wurmstert is al een wat nie lag nie.

“Ek het geskryf snoetvorm, pupille van die oë en kwasstert,” sê hy angstig, “maar ek kon nie dink wat nog nie –”

“Presies hoe dig is jy, Wurmstert?” sê James ongeduldig. “Jy’s elke maand in ’n weerwolf se geselskap –”

“Hei, praat sagter,” sê Lupin.

Harry kyk benoud rond. Snerp is nog steeds besig om sy vraestel te lees – maar dis Snerp se herinnering, en Harry is seker as Snerp iewers anders heen gaan, sal hy nie meer saam met James kan stap nie. Tot sy verligting volg Snerp, nog steeds verdiep in sy vraestel, vir James en sy drie vriende oor die grasperk na die meer. Deur ’n entjie voor Snerp te bly, kan Harry vir James-hulle nog steeds in die oog hou.

“Wel, ek het gedink dit was nogal maklik,” sê Sirius. “Ek sal verbaas wees as ek nie ten minste ’n ‘Uitstekend’ kry nie.”

“Ek ook,” sê James. Hy steek sy hand in sy sak en haal ’n worstelende Goue Snip uit.

“Waar kry jy dit?”

“Gegaps,” sê James ongeërg en begin om met die Snip te speel. Hy laat dit ’n entjie wegvlieg voor hy dit blitsig uit die lug gryp. Sy reflekse is uitstekend en Wurmstert hou hom bewonderend dop.

Hulle gaan sit onder dieselfde berkeboom langs die meer waar Harry, Ron en Hermien een Sondag in die herfs hul huiswerk gedoen het, en strek hulle uit op die gras. Harry kyk om en sien tot sy verligting dat Snerp nie ver daarvandaan nie in diep skaduwee onder 'n paar struik sit. Hy is nog steeds verdiep in sy UIL-vraestel. Harry gaan sit op die gras tussen die berkeboom en die struik en staar na die vierstuks onder die boom. Die son skyn verblindend helder op die meer se gladde oppervlak. Die groep laggende meisies wat pas uit die Groot Saal gekom het, sit op die wal met hulle kaal voete in die water.

Lupin haal 'n boek uit en begin lees. Sirius staar na die studente wat op die gras ronddwaal. Hy lyk verwaand en verveeld, maar baie aantreklik. James speel nog steeds met die Snip. Hy laat dit al verder en verder wegkom voor hy dit op die laaste oomblik uit die lug gryp. Wurmstert hou hom oopmond dop. Elke keer dat James 'n besonder moeilike vangs regkry, snak Wurmstert na asem en klap sy hande. Ná ongeveer vyf minute begin Harry wonder hoekom James nie vir Wurmstert sê om op te hou nie, maar dan besef hy dat James die aandag geniet. Harry sien ook dat sy pa die manier het om sy hand deur sy hare te trek sodat dit nie té netjies moet wees nie en dat hy gedurig na die meisies langs die meer kyk.

"Sit dit tog weg," sê Sirius eindelijk toe Wurmstert vir James ná 'n besonder moeilike vangslag toejuig, "voor Wurmstert hom natmaak van opgewondenheid."

Wurmstert word effens pienk, maar James grinnik.

"As dit jou pla," sê hy en steek die Snip in sy sak. Harry kry die gevoel dat Sirius die enigste een is vir wie James sal ophou om te spog.

"Ek is verveeld," sê Sirius. "Ek wens dit was volmaan."

"Jy mag dalk," sê Lupin somber van agter sy boek. "Ons het nog Transfigurasië. As jy verveeld is, kan jy vir my vrae vra. Hierso . . ."

Hy hou die boek na hom toe uit.

Maar Sirius snork. "Ek hoef nie na daardie gemors te kyk nie. Ek ken dit alles."

"Hier's iets wat jou 'n bietjie sal opvrolik, Kussingvoet," sê James sag. "Kyk wie sit daar oorkant . . ."

Sirius se kop draai. Hy word baie stil, soos 'n hond wat 'n haas geruik het.

"Uitstekend," sê hy sag. "Snuiverus."

Harry draai om om te sien waarna Sirius kyk.

Snerp het opgestaan en is besig om die UIL-vraestel in sy skoolsak te steek. Toe hy uit die skaduwee van die struik oor die gras stap, staan Sirius en James ook op.

Lupin en Wurmstert bly sit. Lupin kyk nog steeds na sy boek, hoewel sy oë nie beweeg nie en 'n frons tussen sy wenkbroue verskyn het. Wurmstert kyk vol afwagting van Sirius en James na Snerp.

"Is alles reg, Snuiverus?" sê James hard.

Snerp reageer so vinnig, asof hy 'n aanval verwag het. Hy gooi sy sak neer, steek sy hand in sy kleed en ruk sy towerstaf uit, maar James is vinniger. "*Expelliarmus!*" skree hy.

Snerp se towerstaf vlieg vier meter in die lug op en val met 'n ligte plof op die gras agter hom. Sirius blaflag.

"*Impedimenta!*" sê hy en rig sy towerstaf op Snerp wie se voete onder hom padgee net toe hy na sy towerstaf duik.

Studente kyk op om te sien wat aangaan en sommige het opgestaan en kom nader. Party lyk behoedsaam, terwyl ander duidelik dink dis snaaks.

James en Sirius stap na Snerp wat op die grond lê, hul towerstawe gereed voor hulle. James loer oor sy skouer na die meisies langs die meer. Wurmstert het ook opgestaan en stap hongerig om Lupin om beter te kan sien.

"Hoe was die eksamen, Snuifie?" vra James.

"Ek het hom dopgehou. Sy neus het aan sy perkament geraak," sê Sirius geniepsig. "Dit gaan vol vetkolle wees. Niemand sal kan lees wat daar staan nie."

Wurmstert giggel skril en verskeie mense lag. Dis duidelik dat Snerp nie gewild is nie. Snerp probeer opstaan, maar die vloek werk nog steeds en hy worstel asof met onsigbare toue vasgebind.

"Wag – net," hyg hy en staar na James, sy gesig vertrek van weersin, "wag – net!"

"Wag waarvoor?" sê Sirius koud. "Wat gaan jy doen, Snuiverus? Jou neus aan ons afvee?"

Snerp uiter 'n reeks vloekwoorde en towerspreuke, maar sy towerstaf is 'n goeie vier meter van hom af en niks gebeur nie.

"So 'n mond moet gewas word," betig James. "*Reinigi!*"

Pienk seepborrels stroom uit Snerp se mond. Daar is soveel skuim dat hy hoes en verstik –

"Los hom UIT!"

James en Sirius kyk om. James se linkerhand vlieg dadelik na sy hare.

Dis een van die meisies wat langs die meer gesit het. Sy het dik, donkerrooi hare wat los oor haar skouers hang en verrassende groen amandelvormige oë.

Harry se oë. Harry se ma.

"Kan ek help, Evans?" vra James en sy stem klink skielik dieper, meer volwasse.

"Los hom uit," herhaal Lily. Dis duidelik aan die manier waarop sy na James kyk dat sy hom nie kan verdra nie. "Wat het hy aan jou gedoen?"

"Wel," sê James en hy maak of hy daaroor nadink, "dis meer die feit dat hy bestaan, as jy weet wat ek bedoel."

Van die omstanders lag, so ook Sirius en Wurmstert, maar Lupin is skynbaar nog steeds verdiep in sy boek. Lily lag ook nie.

"Jy dink jy is só snaaks," sê sy kil, "maar jys net 'n verwaande grootbek-boelie, Potter. Los hom uit."

"Ek sal as jy met my sal uitgaan, Evans," sê James vinnig. "Toe as jy met my uitgaan, sal ek ou Snuifie nooit weer toor nie."

Agter hom is die Hindernisvloek besig om uit te werk en Snerp kruip spoeg-spoeg na sy towerstaf.

"Ek sal eerder met die reuse-inkvis uitgaan as met jou," snou Lily. "Daar het jy dit, Gaffel," sê Sirius en kyk na Snerp. "Oi!"

Maar dis te laat. Snerp rig sy towerstaf op James. Daar is 'n ligflits en 'n sny verskyn op James se wang sodat sy kleed vol bloedspatsels word. James swaai om, daar is 'n tweede ligflits en Snerp hang onderstebo in die lug. Sy kleed val oor sy kop sodat sy maer, bleek bene en 'n gryserige onderbroek uitsteek.

'n Hele klomp van die mense om hulle juig. Sirius, James en Wurmstert brul van die lag.

Lily, wie se gesig effens geflikker het asof sy wou glimlag, sê: "Laat hom afkom!"

"Sekerlik," sê James en ruk sy towerstaf na bo. Snerp val in 'n deurmekaar bondel op die grond. Hy wikkel hom los en staan vinnig op, sy towerstaf uitgestrek voor hom, maar Sirius sê: "Petrificus Totalus!" en Snerp slaan neer, so styf soos 'n plank.

"LOS HOM UIT!" skree Lily. Sy het ook haar towerstaf uitgehaal en James en Sirius kyk onrustig daarna.

"A, Evans, moenie veroorsaak dat ek jou moet toor nie," sê James speels.

"Lig dan daardie vloek!"

James draai met 'n diep sug na Snerp en prewel die teenvloek.

"Weg is jy," sê hy toe Snerp orent sukkel. "Dis jou geluk dat Evans hier was, Snuiverus –"

"Ek het nie 'n vuil klein Modderbloed se hulp nodig nie!" Lily knipper haar oë.

"Goed," sê sy koeltjies. "Ek sal nie weer inmeng nie. En ek sal my onderklere was as ek jy is, Snuiverus."

“Vra vir Evans om verskoning!” brul James en rig sy towerstaf dreigend op Snerp.

“Moenie jy hom probeer dwing nie,” skree Lily ergerlik vir James. “Jy’s niks beter as hy nie.”

“Wat?” gil James. “Ek sal jou NOOIT ’n – jy-weet-wat noem nie.”

“Frommel jou hare omdat jy dink dis oulik om te lyk of jy nou net van jou besem afgeklim het, trek aandag met daardie simpel Snip, loop op en af in die gange en toor almal wat jou kwaad maak net omdat jy kan – ek weet nie hoe jou besem nog kan opstyg met daardie groot kop daarop nie. Jy maak my SIEK!”

Sy draai om en stap vinnig weg.

“Evans!” skree James agterna. “Haai, EVANS!”

Maar sy kyk nie om nie.

“Wat’s haar probleem?” sê James, wat sy bes doen om te lyk asof dit hom nie traak nie.

“As ek tussen die reëls lees, sou ek sê sy dink jy’s verwaand, my ou,” sê Sirius.

“Goed,” sê James, wat nou woedend lyk, “goed –”

Daar is nog ’n ligflits en Snerp hang weer onderstebo in die lug.

“Wie wil sien hoe ek ou Snuifie se broek aftoor?”

Harry sal nooit weet of James regtig Snerp se broek afgetoor het nie. ’n Hand sluit soos ’n klamp om sy boarm. Hy krimp ineen en kyk op. Dis met ’n skok dat hy die volwasse Snerp langs hom sien staan. ’n Snerp wat wil van woede is.

“Geniet jy dit?”

Harry voel hoe hy opstyg, hoe die somerdag om hom verdwyn. Hy dryf deur ysige donkerte boontoe, Snerp se hand nog steeds styf om sy boarm. Toe, met ’n swemmende sensasie asof hy kop onderstebo deur die lug tol, tref sy voete Snerp se kerkervloer en staan hy weer langs die Peinssif in die Towerdrankies-onderwyser se skemer kantoor.

“So,” sê Snerp en verstewig sy greep op Harry se arm sodat Harry se hand begin lam word. “So . . . het jy dit geniet, Potter?”

“N-nee,” sê Harry en probeer om sy arm los te wikkkel.

Snerp is ’n skrikwekkende gesig: sy lippe bewe, sy gesig is wit en sy tande is ontbloot.

“Grappige man, jou pa, nie waar nie?” sê Snerp en skud Harry so hard dat sy bril oor sy neus gly.

“Ek – het nie –”

Snerp slinger Harry met soveel geweld van hom af weg dat hy hard op die kerkervloer val.

“Jy sal vir niemand vertel wat jy gesien het nie!” bulder Snerp.

"Nee," sê Harry. Hy kom so ver moontlik van Snerp af orent.
"Nee, ek sal natuurlik nie –"

"Trap! Ek wil jou nooit weer in hierdie kantoor sien nie, trap!"

Toe Harry na die deur nael, ontplof 'n fles dooie kakkerlakke bo sy kop. Hy trek die deur oop, vlieg in die gang af en kom eers drie verdiepings verder tot stilstand. Hy leun hygend teen die muur en vryf sy gekneusde arm.

Hy kan nie nou al teruggaan na die Griffindor-toring nie. En hy wil ook nie vir Ron en Hermien vertel wat hy gesien het nie. Dis nie Snerp se geskree of die fles wat hy na hom geslinger het wat hom so ongelukkig en verskrik maak nie, dis dat hy weet hoe dit voel om voor ander mense verneder te word. Hy weet presies hoe Snerp gevoel het toe sy pa hom getart het. Maar die ergste is dat dit gelyk het asof sy pa net so verwaand was soos wat Snerp nog altyd gesê het.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



CAREER ADVICE

But why haven't you got Occlumency lessons anymore?" said Hermione, frowning.

"I've *told* you," Harry muttered. "Snape reckons I can carry on by myself now I've got the basics . . ."

"So you've stopped having funny dreams?" said Hermione skeptically.

"Pretty much," said Harry, not looking at her.

"Well, I don't think Snape should stop until you're absolutely sure you can control them!" said Hermione indignantly. "Harry, I think you should go back to him and ask —"

"No," said Harry forcefully. "Just drop it, Hermione, okay?"

It was the first day of the Easter holidays and Hermione, as was her custom, had spent a large part of the day drawing up study schedules for the three of them. Harry and Ron had let her do it — it was easier than arguing with her and, in any case, they might come in useful.

Ron had been startled to discover that there were only six weeks left until their exams.

“How can that come as a shock?” Hermione demanded, as she tapped each little square on Ron’s schedule with her wand so that it flashed a different color according to its subject.

“I dunno . . .” said Ron, “there’s been a lot going on . . .”

“Well, there you are,” she said, handing him his schedule, “if you follow that you should do fine.”

Ron looked down it gloomily, but then brightened.

“You’ve given me an evening off every week!”

“That’s for Quidditch practice,” said Hermione.

The smile faded from Ron’s face.

“What’s the point?” he said. “We’ve got about as much chance of winning the Quidditch Cup this year as Dad’s got of becoming Minister of Magic . . .”

Hermione said nothing. She was looking at Harry, who was staring blankly at the opposite wall of the common room while Crookshanks pawed at his hand, trying to get his ears scratched.

“What’s wrong, Harry?”

“What?” he said quickly. “Nothing . . .”

He seized his copy of *Defensive Magical Theory* and pretended to be looking something up in the index. Crookshanks gave him up as a

bad job and slunk away under Hermione's chair.

"I saw Cho earlier," said Hermione tentatively, "and she looked really miserable too. . . . Have you two had a row again?"

"Wha — oh yeah, we have," said Harry, seizing gratefully on the excuse.

"What about?"

"That sneak friend of hers, Marietta," said Harry.

"Yeah, well, I don't blame you!" said Ron angrily, setting down his study schedule. "If it hadn't been for her . . ."

Ron went into a rant about Marietta Edgecombe, which Harry found helpful. All he had to do was look angry, nod, and say "yeah" and "that's right" whenever Ron drew breath, leaving his mind free to dwell, ever more miserably, on what he had seen in the Pensieve.

He felt as though the memory of it was eating him from inside. He had been so sure that his parents had been wonderful people that he never had the slightest difficulty in disbelieving Snape's aspersions on his father's character. Hadn't people like Hagrid and Sirius *told* Harry how wonderful his father had been? (*Yeah, well, look what Sirius was like himself*, said a nagging voice inside Harry's head. . . . *He was as bad, wasn't he?*) Yes, he had once overheard Professor McGonagall saying that his father and Sirius had been troublemakers at school, but she had described them as forerunners of the Weasley twins, and Harry could not imagine Fred and George dangling someone upside down for the fun of it . . . not unless they really loathed them . . . Perhaps Malfoy, or somebody who really deserved it . . .

Harry tried to make a case for Snape having deserved what he had

suffered at James's hands — but hadn't Lily asked, "What's he done to you?" And hadn't James replied, "It's more the fact that he *exists*, if you know what I mean?" Hadn't James started it all simply because Sirius said he was bored? Harry remembered Lupin saying back in Grimmauld Place that Dumbledore had made him prefect in the hope that he would be able to exercise some control over James and Sirius. . . . But in the Pensieve, he had sat there and let it all happen. . . .

Harry reminded himself that Lily had intervened; his mother had been decent, yet the memory of the look on her face as she had shouted at James disturbed him quite as much as anything else. She had clearly loathed James and Harry simply could not understand how they could have ended up married. Once or twice he even wondered whether James had forced her into it. . . .

For nearly five years the thought of his father had been a source of comfort, of inspiration. Whenever someone had told him he was like James he had glowed with pride inside. And now . . . now he felt cold and miserable at the thought of him.

The weather grew breezier, brighter, and warmer as the holidays passed, but Harry was stuck with the rest of the fifth and seventh years, who were all trapped inside, traipsing back and forth to the library. Harry pretended that his bad mood had no other cause but the approaching exams, and as his fellow Gryffindors were sick of studying themselves, his excuse went unchallenged.

"Harry, I'm talking to you, can you hear me?"

"Huh?"

He looked around. Ginny Weasley, looking very windswept, had

joined him at the library table where he had been sitting alone. It was late on Sunday evening; Hermione had gone back to Gryffindor Tower to review Ancient Runes; Ron had Quidditch practice.

“Oh hi,” said Harry, pulling his books back toward him. “How come you’re not at practice?”

“It’s over,” said Ginny. “Ron had to take Jack Sloper up to the hospital wing.”

“Why?”

“Well, we’re not sure, but we *think* he knocked himself out with his own bat.” She sighed heavily. “Anyway . . . a package just arrived, it’s only just got through Umbridge’s new screening process . . .”

She hoisted a box wrapped in brown paper onto the table; it had clearly been unwrapped and carelessly rewrapped, and there was a scribbled note across it in red ink, reading INSPECTED AND PASSED BY THE HOGWARTS HIGH INQUISITOR.

“It’s Easter eggs from Mum,” said Ginny. “There’s one for you. There you go . . .”

She handed him a handsome chocolate egg decorated with small, iced Snitches and, according to the packaging, containing a bag of Fizzing Whizbees. Harry looked at it for a moment, then, to his horror, felt a hard lump rise in his throat.

“Are you okay, Harry?” asked Ginny quietly.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” said Harry gruffly. The lump in his throat was painful. He did not understand why an Easter egg should have made him feel like this.

“You seem really down lately,” Ginny persisted. “You know, I’m

sure if you just *talked* to Cho . . .”

“It’s not Cho I want to talk to,” said Harry brusquely.

“Who is it, then?” asked Ginny.

“I . . .”

He glanced around to make quite sure that nobody was listening. Madam Pince was several shelves away, stamping out a pile of books for a frantic-looking Hannah Abbott.

“I wish I could talk to Sirius,” he muttered. “But I know I can’t.”

More to give himself something to do than because he really wanted any, Harry unwrapped his Easter egg, broke off a large bit, and put it into his mouth.

“Well,” said Ginny slowly, helping herself to a bit of egg too, “if you really want to talk to Sirius, I expect we could think of a way to do it . . .”

“Come on,” said Harry hopelessly. “With Umbridge policing the fires and reading all our mail?”

“The thing about growing up with Fred and George,” said Ginny thoughtfully, “is that you sort of start thinking anything’s possible if you’ve got enough nerve.”

Harry looked at her. Perhaps it was the effect of the chocolate — Lupin had always advised eating some after encounters with dementors — or simply because he had finally spoken aloud the wish that had been burning inside him for a week, but he felt a bit more hopeful . . .

“WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?”

“Oh damn,” whispered Ginny, jumping to her feet. “I forgot —”

Madam Pince was swooping down upon them, her shriveled face

contorted with rage.

“Chocolate in the library!” she screamed. *“Out — out — OUT!”*

And whipping out her wand, she caused Harry’s books, bag, and ink bottle to chase him and Ginny from the library, whacking them repeatedly over the head as they ran.

As though to underline the importance of their upcoming examinations, a batch of pamphlets, leaflets, and notices concerning various Wizarding careers appeared on the tables in Gryffindor Tower shortly before the end of the holidays, along with yet another notice on the board, which read:

CAREER ADVICE

All fifth years will be required to attend a short meeting with their Head of House during the first week of the Summer term, in which they will be given the opportunity to discuss their future careers. Times of individual appointments are listed below.

Harry looked down the list and found that he was expected in Professor McGonagall’s office at half-past two on Monday, which would mean missing most of Divination. He and the other fifth years spent a considerable part of the final weekend of the Easter break reading all the career information that had been left there for their perusal.

“Well, I don’t fancy Healing,” said Ron on the last evening of the holidays. He was immersed in a leaflet that carried the crossed bone-

and-wand emblem of St. Mungo's on its front. "It says here you need at least an E at N.E.W.T. level in Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. I mean . . . blimey. . . . Don't want much, do they?"

"Well, it's a very responsible job, isn't it?" said Hermione absently. She was poring over a bright pink-and-orange leaflet that was headed SO YOU THINK YOU'D LIKE TO WORK IN MUGGLE RELATIONS? "You don't seem to need many qualifications to liaise with Muggles. . . . All they want is an O.W.L. in Muggle Studies. *'Much more important is your enthusiasm, patience, and a good sense of fun!'*"

"You'd need more than a good sense of fun to liaise with my uncle," said Harry darkly. "Good sense of when to duck, more like . . ." He was halfway through a pamphlet on Wizard banking. "Listen to this:

"Are you seeking a challenging career involving travel, adventure, and substantial, danger-related treasure bonuses? Then consider a position with Gringotts Wizarding Bank, who are currently recruiting Curse-Breakers for thrilling opportunities abroad. . . .' They want Arithmancy, though. . . . You could do it, Hermione!"

"I don't much fancy banking," said Hermione vaguely, now immersed in HAVE YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES TO TRAIN SECURITY TROLLS?

"Hey," said a voice in Harry's ear. He looked around; Fred and George had come to join them. "Ginny's had a word with us about you," said Fred, stretching out his legs on the table in front of them and causing several booklets on careers with the Ministry of Magic

to slide off onto the floor. "She says you need to talk to Sirius?"

"What?" said Hermione sharply, freezing with her hand halfway toward picking up MAKE A BANG AT THE DEPARTMENT OF MAGICAL ACCIDENTS AND CATASTROPHES.

"Yeah . . ." said Harry, trying to sound casual, "yeah, I thought I'd like —"

"Don't be so ridiculous," said Hermione, straightening up and looking at him as though she could not believe her eyes. "With Umbridge groping around in the fires and frisking all the owls?"

"Well, we think we can find a way around that," said George, stretching and smiling. "It's a simple matter of causing a diversion. Now, you might have noticed that we have been rather quiet on the mayhem front during the Easter holidays?"

"What was the point, we asked ourselves, of disrupting leisure time?" continued Fred. "No point at all, we answered ourselves. And of course, we'd have messed up people's studying too, which would be the very last thing we'd want to do."

He gave Hermione a sanctimonious little nod. She looked rather taken aback by this thoughtfulness.

"But it's business as usual from tomorrow," Fred continued briskly. "And if we're going to be causing a bit of uproar, why not do it so that Harry can have his chat with Sirius?"

"Yes, but *still*," said Hermione with an air of explaining something very simple to somebody very obtuse, "even if you *do* cause a diversion, how is Harry supposed to talk to him?"

"Umbridge's office," said Harry quietly.

He had been thinking about it for a fortnight and could think of no

alternative; Umbridge herself had told him that the only fire that was not being watched was her own.

“Are — you — insane?” said Hermione in a hushed voice.

Ron had lowered his leaflet on jobs in the cultivated fungus trade and was watching the conversation warily.

“I don’t think so,” said Harry, shrugging.

“And how are you going to get in there in the first place?”

Harry was ready for this question.

“Sirius’s knife,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“Christmas before last Sirius gave me a knife that’ll open any lock,” said Harry. “So even if she’s bewitched the door so *Alohomora* won’t work, which I bet she has —”

“What do you think about this?” Hermione demanded of Ron, and Harry was reminded irresistibly of Mrs. Weasley appealing to her husband during Harry’s first dinner in Grimmauld Place.

“I dunno,” said Ron, looking alarmed at being asked to give an opinion. “If Harry wants to do it, it’s up to him, isn’t it?”

“Spoken like a true friend and Weasley,” said Fred, clapping Ron hard on the back. “Right, then. We’re thinking of doing it tomorrow, just after lessons, because it should cause maximum impact if everybody’s in the corridors — Harry, we’ll set it off in the east wing somewhere, draw her right away from her own office — I reckon we should be able to guarantee you, what, twenty minutes?” he said, looking at George.

“Easy,” said George.

“What sort of diversion is it?” asked Ron.

“You’ll see, little bro,” said Fred, as he and George got up again. “At least, you will if you trot along to Gregory the Smarmy’s corridor round about five o’clock tomorrow.”

Harry awoke very early the next day, feeling almost as anxious as he had done on the morning of his hearing at the Ministry of Magic. It was not only the prospect of breaking into Umbridge’s office and using her fire to speak to Sirius that was making him feel nervous, though that was certainly bad enough — today also happened to be the first time he would be in close proximity with Snape since Snape had thrown him out of his office, as they had Potions that day.

After lying in bed for a while thinking about the day ahead, Harry got up very quietly and moved across to the window beside Neville’s bed, staring out on a truly glorious morning. The sky was a clear, misty, opalescent blue. Directly ahead of him, Harry could see the towering beech tree below which his father had once tormented Snape. He was not sure what Sirius could possibly say to him that would make up for what he had seen in the Pensieve, but he was desperate to hear Sirius’s own account of what had happened, to know of any mitigating factors there might have been, any excuse at all for his father’s behavior. . . .

Something caught Harry’s attention: movement on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Harry squinted into the sun and saw Hagrid emerging from between the trees. He seemed to be limping. As Harry watched, Hagrid staggered to the door of his cabin and disappeared inside it. Harry watched the cabin for several minutes. Hagrid did not emerge again, but smoke furred from the chimney, so Hagrid could

not be so badly injured that he was unequal to stoking the fire.

Harry turned away from the window, headed back to his trunk, and started to dress.

With the prospect of forcing entry into Umbridge's office ahead, Harry had never expected the day to be a restful one, but he had not reckoned on Hermione's almost continual attempts to dissuade him from what he was planning to do at five o'clock. For the first time ever, she was at least as inattentive to Professor Binns in History of Magic as Harry and Ron were, keeping up a stream of whispered admonitions that Harry tried very hard to ignore.

"... and if she does catch you there, apart from being expelled, she'll be able to guess you've been talking to Snuffles and this time I expect she'll *force* you to drink Veritaserum and answer her questions ..."

"Hermione," said Ron in a low and indignant voice, "are you going to stop telling Harry off and listen to Binns, or am I going to have to take notes instead?"

"You take notes for a change, it won't kill you!"

By the time they reached the dungeons, neither Harry nor Ron was speaking to Hermione any longer. Undeterred, she took advantage of their silence to maintain an uninterrupted flow of dire warnings, all uttered under her breath in a vehement hiss that caused Seamus to waste five whole minutes checking his cauldron for leaks.

Snape, meanwhile, seemed to have decided to act as though Harry were invisible. Harry was, of course, well used to this tactic, as it was one of Uncle Vernon's favorites, and on the whole was grateful he had to suffer nothing worse. In fact, compared to what he usually

had to endure from Snape in the way of taunts and snide remarks, he found the new approach something of an improvement and was pleased to find that when left well alone, he was able to concoct an Invigoration Draught quite easily. At the end of the lesson he scooped some of the potion into a flask, corked it, and took it up to Snape's desk for marking, feeling that he might at last have scraped an E.

He had just turned away when he heard a smashing noise; Malfoy gave a gleeful yell of laughter. Harry whipped around again. His potion sample lay in pieces on the floor, and Snape was watching him with a look of gloating pleasure.

"Whoops," he said softly. "Another zero, then, Potter . . ."

Harry was too incensed to speak. He strode back to his cauldron, intending to fill another flask and force Snape to mark it, but saw to his horror that the rest of the contents had vanished.

"I'm sorry!" said Hermione with her hands over her mouth. "I'm really sorry, Harry, I thought you'd finished, so I cleared up!"

Harry could not bring himself to answer. When the bell rang he hurried out of the dungeon without a backward glance and made sure that he found himself a seat between Neville and Seamus for lunch so that Hermione could not start nagging him about using Umbridge's office again.

He was in such a bad mood by the time that he got to Divination that he had quite forgotten his career appointment with Professor McGonagall, remembering only when Ron asked him why he wasn't in her office. He hurtled back upstairs and arrived out of breath, only a few minutes late.

"Sorry, Professor," he panted, as he closed the door. "I forgot . . ."

“No matter, Potter,” she said briskly, but as she spoke, somebody else sniffed from the corner. Harry looked around.

Professor Umbridge was sitting there, a clipboard on her knee, a fussy little pie-frill around her neck, and a small, horribly smug smile on her face.

“Sit down, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall tersely. Her hands shook slightly as she shuffled the many pamphlets littering her desk.

Harry sat down with his back to Umbridge and did his best to pretend he could not hear the scratching of her quill on her clipboard.

“Well, Potter, this meeting is to talk over any career ideas you might have, and to help you decide which subjects you should continue into sixth and seventh years,” said Professor McGonagall. “Have you had any thoughts about what you would like to do after you leave Hogwarts?”

“Er,” said Harry.

He was finding the scratching noise from behind him very distracting.

“Yes?” Professor McGonagall prompted Harry.

“Well, I thought of, maybe, being an Auror,” Harry mumbled.

“You’d need top grades for that,” said Professor McGonagall, extracting a small, dark leaflet from under the mass on her desk and opening it. “They ask for a minimum of five N.E.W.T.s, and nothing under ‘Exceeds Expectations’ grade, I see. Then you would be required to undergo a stringent series of character and aptitude tests at the Auror office. It’s a difficult career path, Potter; they only take the best. In fact, I don’t think anybody has been taken on in the last three years.”

At this moment Professor Umbridge gave a very tiny cough, as though she was trying to see how quietly she could do it. Professor McGonagall ignored her.

“You’ll want to know which subjects you ought to take, I suppose?” she went on, talking a little more loudly than before.

“Yes,” said Harry. “Defense Against the Dark Arts, I suppose?”

“Naturally,” said Professor McGonagall crisply. “I would also advise —”

Professor Umbridge gave another cough, a little more audible this time. Professor McGonagall closed her eyes for a moment, opened them again, and continued as though nothing had happened.

“I would also advise Transfiguration, because Aurors frequently need to Transfigure or Untransfigure in their work. And I ought to tell you now, Potter, that I do not accept students into my N.E.W.T. classes unless they have achieved ‘Exceeds Expectations’ or higher at Ordinary Wizarding Level. I’d say you’re averaging ‘Acceptable’ at the moment, so you’ll need to put in some good hard work before the exams to stand a chance of continuing. Then you ought to do Charms, always useful, and Potions. Yes, Potter, Potions,” she added, with the merest flicker of a smile. “Poisons and antidotes are essential study for Aurors. And I must tell you that Professor Snape absolutely refuses to take students who get anything other than ‘Outstanding’ in their O.W.L.s, so —”

Professor Umbridge gave her most pronounced cough yet.

“May I offer you a cough drop, Dolores?” Professor McGonagall asked curtly, without looking at Professor Umbridge.

“Oh no, thank you very much,” said Umbridge, with that simpering

laugh Harry hated so much. “I just wondered whether I could make the teensiest interruption, Minerva?”

“I daresay you’ll find you can,” said Professor McGonagall through tightly gritted teeth.

“I was just wondering whether Mr. Potter has *quite* the temperament for an Auror?” said Professor Umbridge sweetly.

“Were you?” said Professor McGonagall haughtily. “Well, Potter,” she continued, as though there had been no interruption, “if you are serious in this ambition, I would advise you to concentrate hard on bringing your Transfiguration and Potions up to scratch. I see Professor Flitwick has graded you between ‘Acceptable’ and ‘Exceeds Expectations’ for the last two years, so your Charm work seems satisfactory; as for Defense Against the Dark Arts, your marks have been generally high, Professor Lupin in particular thought you — *are you quite sure you wouldn’t like a cough drop, Dolores?*”

“Oh, no need, thank you, Minerva,” simpered Professor Umbridge, who had just coughed her loudest yet. “I was just concerned that you might not have Harry’s most recent Defense Against the Dark Arts marks in front of you. I’m quite sure I slipped in a note . . .”

“What, this thing?” said Professor McGonagall in a tone of revulsion, as she pulled a sheet of pink parchment from between the leaves of Harry’s folder. She glanced down it, her eyebrows slightly raised, then placed it back into the folder without comment.

“Yes, as I was saying, Potter, Professor Lupin thought you showed a pronounced aptitude for the subject, and obviously for an Auror —”

“Did you not understand my note, Minerva?” asked Professor

Umbridge in honeyed tones, quite forgetting to cough.

“Of course I understood it,” said Professor McGonagall, her teeth clenched so tightly that the words came out a little muffled.

“Well, then, I am confused. . . . I’m afraid I don’t quite understand how you can give Mr. Potter false hope that —”

“False hope?” repeated Professor McGonagall, still refusing to look round at Professor Umbridge. “He has achieved high marks in all his Defense Against the Dark Arts tests —”

“I’m terribly sorry to have to contradict you, Minerva, but as you will see from my note, Harry has been achieving very poor results in his classes with me —”

“I should have made my meaning plainer,” said Professor McGonagall, turning at last to look Umbridge directly in the eyes. “He has achieved high marks in all Defense Against the Dark Arts tests set by a competent teacher.”

Professor Umbridge’s smile vanished as suddenly as a lightbulb blowing. She sat back in her chair, turned a sheet on her clipboard, and began scribbling very fast indeed, her bulging eyes rolling from side to side. Professor McGonagall turned back to Harry, her thin nostrils flared, her eyes burning.

“Any questions, Potter?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “What sort of character and aptitude tests do the Ministry do on you, if you get enough N.E.W.T.s?”

“Well, you’ll need to demonstrate the ability to react well to pressure and so forth,” said Professor McGonagall, “perseverance and dedication, because Auror training takes a further three years, not to mention very high skills in practical defense. It will mean a lot

more study even after you've left school, so unless you're prepared to —"

"I think you'll also find," said Umbridge, her voice very cold now, "that the Ministry looks into the records of those applying to be Aurors. Their criminal records."

"— unless you're prepared to take even more exams after Hogwarts, you should really look at another —"

"— which means that this boy has as much chance of becoming an Auror as Dumbledore has of ever returning to this school."

"A very good chance, then," said Professor McGonagall.

"Potter has a criminal record," said Umbridge loudly.

"Potter has been cleared of all charges," said Professor McGonagall, even more loudly.

Professor Umbridge stood up. She was so short that this did not make a great deal of difference, but her fussy, simpering demeanor had given place to a hard fury that made her broad, flabby face look oddly sinister.

"Potter has no chance whatsoever of becoming an Auror!"

Professor McGonagall got to her feet too, and in her case this was a much more impressive move. She towered over Professor Umbridge.

"Potter," she said in ringing tones, "I will assist you to become an Auror if it is the last thing I do! If I have to coach you nightly I will make sure you achieve the required results!"

"The Minister of Magic will never employ Harry Potter!" said Umbridge, her voice rising furiously.

"There may well be a new Minister of Magic by the time Potter is

ready to join!” shouted Professor McGonagall.

“Aha!” shrieked Professor Umbridge, pointing a stubby finger at McGonagall. “Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Of course! That’s what you want, isn’t it, Minerva McGonagall? You want Cornelius Fudge replaced by Albus Dumbledore! You think you’ll be where I am, don’t you, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister and headmistress to boot!”

“You are raving,” said Professor McGonagall, superbly disdainful. “Potter, that concludes our career consultation.”

Harry swung his bag over his shoulder and hurried out of the room, not daring to look at Umbridge. He could hear her and Professor McGonagall continuing to shout at each other all the way back along the corridor.

Professor Umbridge was still breathing as though she had just run a race when she strode into their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson that afternoon.

“I hope you’ve thought better of what you were planning to do, Harry,” Hermione whispered, the moment they had opened their books to chapter thirty-four (“Non-Retaliation and Negotiation”). “Umbridge looks like she’s in a really bad mood already . . .”

Every now and then Umbridge shot glowering looks at Harry, who kept his head down, staring at *Defensive Magical Theory*, his eyes unfocused, thinking . . .

He could just imagine Professor McGonagall’s reaction if he were caught trespassing in Professor Umbridge’s office mere hours after she had vouched for him . . . There was nothing to stop him simply going back to Gryffindor Tower and hoping that sometime during the next summer holiday he would have a chance to ask Sirius about the

scene he had witnessed in the Pensieve. . . . Nothing, except that the thought of taking this sensible course of action made him feel as though a lead weight had dropped into his stomach. . . . And then there was the matter of Fred and George, whose diversion was already planned, not to mention the knife Sirius had given him, which was currently residing in his schoolbag along with his father's old Invisibility Cloak. . . .

But the fact remained that if he were caught . . .

"Dumbledore sacrificed himself to keep you in school, Harry!" whispered Hermione, raising her book to hide her face from Umbridge. "And if you get thrown out today it will all have been for nothing!"

He could abandon the plan and simply learn to live with the memory of what his father had done on a summer's day more than twenty years ago. . . .

And then he remembered Sirius in the fire upstairs in the Gryffindor common room. . . . "You're less like your father than I thought. . . . The risk would've been what made it fun for James. . . ."

But did he want to be like his father anymore?

"Harry, don't do it, please don't do it!" Hermione said in anguished tones as the bell rang at the end of the class.

He did not answer; he did not know what to do. Ron seemed determined to give neither his opinion nor his advice. He would not look at Harry, though when Hermione opened her mouth to try dissuading Harry some more, he said in a low voice, "Give it a rest, okay? He can make up his own mind."

Harry's heart beat very fast as he left the classroom. He was

halfway along the corridor outside when he heard the unmistakable sounds of a diversion going off in the distance. There were screams and yells reverberating from somewhere above them. People exiting the classrooms all around Harry were stopping in their tracks and looking up at the ceiling fearfully —

Then Umbridge came pelting out of her classroom as fast as her short legs would carry her. Pulling out her wand, she hurried off in the opposite direction. It was now or never.

“Harry — please!” said Hermione weakly.

But he had made up his mind — hitching his bag more securely onto his shoulder he set off at a run, weaving in and out of students now hurrying in the opposite direction, off to see what all the fuss was about in the east wing. . . .

Harry reached the corridor where Umbridge’s office was situated and found it deserted. Dashing behind a large suit of armor whose helmet creaked around to watch him, he pulled open his bag, seized Sirius’s knife, and donned the Invisibility Cloak. He then crept slowly and carefully back out from behind the suit of armor and along the corridor until he reached Umbridge’s door.

He inserted the blade of the magical knife into the crack around it and moved it gently up and down, then withdrew it. There was a tiny *click*, and the door swung open. He ducked inside the office, closed the door quickly behind him, and looked around.

It was empty; nothing was moving except the horrible kittens on the plates continuing to frolic on the wall above the confiscated broomsticks.

Harry pulled off his Cloak and, striding over to the fireplace,

found what he was looking for within seconds: a small box containing glittering Floo powder.

He crouched down in front of the empty grate, his hands shaking. He had never done this before, though he thought he knew how it must work. Sticking his head into the fireplace, he took a large pinch of powder and dropped it onto the logs stacked neatly beneath him. They exploded at once into emerald-green flames.

“Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!” Harry said loudly and clearly.

It was one of the most curious sensations he had ever experienced; he had traveled by Floo powder before, of course, but then it had been his entire body that had spun around and around in the flames through the network of Wizarding fireplaces that stretched over the country. This time, his knees remained firm upon the cold floor of Umbridge’s office, and only his head hurtled through the emerald fire.

And then, abruptly as it had begun, the spinning stopped. Feeling rather sick and as though he was wearing an exceptionally hot muffler around his head, Harry opened his eyes to find that he was looking up out of the kitchen fireplace at the long, wooden table, where a man sat poring over a piece of parchment.

“Sirius?”

The man jumped and looked around. It was not Sirius, but Lupin.

“Harry!” he said, looking thoroughly shocked. “What are you — what’s happened, is everything all right?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “I just wondered — I mean, I just fancied a — a chat with Sirius.”

"I'll call him," said Lupin, getting to his feet, still looking perplexed. "He went upstairs to look for Kreacher, he seems to be hiding in the attic again . . ."

And Harry saw Lupin hurry out of the kitchen. Now he was left with nothing to look at but the chair and table legs. He wondered why Sirius had never mentioned how very uncomfortable it was to speak out of the fire — his knees were already objecting painfully to their prolonged contact with Umbridge's hard stone floor.

Lupin returned with Sirius at his heels moments later.

"What is it?" said Sirius urgently, sweeping his long dark hair out of his eyes and dropping to the ground in front of the fire, so that he and Harry were on a level; Lupin knelt down too, looking very concerned. "Are you all right? Do you need help?"

"No," said Harry, "it's nothing like that . . . I just wanted to talk . . . about my dad . . ."

They exchanged a look of great surprise, but Harry did not have time to feel awkward or embarrassed; his knees were becoming sorer by the second, and he guessed that five minutes had already passed from the start of the diversion — George had only guaranteed him twenty. He therefore plunged immediately into the story of what he had seen in the Pensieve.

When he had finished, neither Sirius nor Lupin spoke for a moment. Then Lupin said quietly, "I wouldn't like you to judge your father on what you saw there, Harry. He was only fifteen —"

"I'm fifteen!" said Harry heatedly.

"Look, Harry," said Sirius placatingly, "James and Snape hated each other from the moment they set eyes on each other, it was just

one of those things, you can understand that, can't you? I think James was everything Snape wanted to be — he was popular, he was good at Quidditch, good at pretty much everything. And Snape was just this little oddball who was up to his eyes in the Dark Arts and James — whatever else he may have appeared to you, Harry — always hated the Dark Arts."

"Yeah," said Harry, "but he just attacked Snape for no good reason, just because — well, just because you said you were bored," he finished with a slightly apologetic note in his voice.

"I'm not proud of it," said Sirius quickly.

Lupin looked sideways at Sirius and then said, "Look, Harry, what you've got to understand is that your father and Sirius were the best in the school at whatever they did — everyone thought they were the height of cool — if they sometimes got a bit carried away —"

"If we were sometimes arrogant little berks, you mean," said Sirius.

Lupin smiled.

"He kept messing up his hair," said Harry in a pained voice.

Sirius and Lupin laughed.

"I'd forgotten he used to do that," said Sirius affectionately.

"Was he playing with the Snitch?" said Lupin eagerly.

"Yeah," said Harry, watching uncomprehendingly as Sirius and Lupin beamed reminiscently. "Well . . . I thought he was a bit of an idiot."

"Of course he was a bit of an idiot!" said Sirius bracingly. "We were all idiots! Well — not Moony so much," he said fairly, looking at Lupin, but Lupin shook his head.

“Did I ever tell you to lay off Snape?” he said. “Did I ever have the guts to tell you I thought you were out of order?”

“Yeah, well,” said Sirius, “you made us feel ashamed of ourselves sometimes. . . . That was something. . . .”

“And,” said Harry doggedly, determined to say everything that was on his mind now he was here, “he kept looking over at the girls by the lake, hoping they were watching him!”

“Oh, well, he always made a fool of himself whenever Lily was around,” said Sirius, shrugging. “He couldn’t stop himself showing off whenever he got near her.”

“How come she married him?” Harry asked miserably. “She hated him!”

“Nah, she didn’t,” said Sirius.

“She started going out with him in seventh year,” said Lupin.

“Once James had deflated his head a bit,” said Sirius.

“And stopped hexing people just for the fun of it,” said Lupin.

“Even Snape?” said Harry.

“Well,” said Lupin slowly, “Snape was a special case. I mean, he never lost an opportunity to curse James, so you couldn’t really expect James to take that lying down, could you?”

“And my mum was okay with that?”

“She didn’t know too much about it, to tell you the truth,” said Sirius. “I mean, James didn’t take Snape on dates with her and jinx him in front of her, did he?”

Sirius frowned at Harry, who was still looking unconvinced.

“Look,” he said, “your father was the best friend I ever had, and he

was a good person. A lot of people are idiots at the age of fifteen. He grew out of it.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Harry heavily. “I just never thought I’d feel sorry for Snape.”

“Now you mention it,” said Lupin, a faint crease between his eyebrows, “how did Snape react when he found you’d seen all this?”

“He told me he’d never teach me Occlumency again,” said Harry indifferently, “like that’s a big disappoint —”

“He WHAT?” shouted Sirius, causing Harry to jump and inhale a mouthful of ashes.

“Are you serious, Harry?” said Lupin quickly. “He’s stopped giving you lessons?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, surprised at what he considered a great overreaction. “But it’s okay, I don’t care, it’s a bit of a relief to tell you the —”

“I’m coming up there to have a word with Snape!” said Sirius forcefully and he actually made to stand up, but Lupin wrenched him back down again.

“If anyone’s going to tell Snape it will be me!” he said firmly. “But Harry, first of all, you’re to go back to Snape and tell him that on no account is he to stop giving you lessons — when Dumbledore hears —”

“I can’t tell him that, he’d kill me!” said Harry, outraged. “You didn’t see him when we got out of the Pensieve —”

“Harry, there is nothing so important as you learning Occlumency!” said Lupin sternly. “Do you understand me? Nothing!”

“Okay, okay,” said Harry, thoroughly discomposed, not to mention

annoyed. "I'll . . . I'll try and say something to him. . . . But it won't be . . ."

He fell silent. He could hear distant footsteps.

"Is that Kreacher coming downstairs?"

"No," said Sirius, glancing behind him. "It must be somebody your end . . ."

Harry's heart skipped several beats.

"I'd better go!" he said hastily and he pulled his head backward out of Grimmauld Place's fire. For a moment his head seemed to be revolving on his shoulders, and then he found himself kneeling in front of Umbridge's fire with his head firmly back on, watching the emerald flames flicker and die.

"Quickly, quickly!" he heard a wheezy voice mutter right outside the office door. "Ah, she's left it open . . ."

Harry dived for the Invisibility Cloak and had just managed to pull it back over himself when Filch burst into the office. He looked absolutely delighted about something and was talking to himself feverishly as he crossed the room, pulled open a drawer in Umbridge's desk, and began rifling through the papers inside it.

"Approval for Whipping . . . Approval for Whipping . . . I can do it at last. . . . They've had it coming to them for years . . ."

He pulled out a piece of parchment, kissed it, then shuffled rapidly back out of the door, clutching it to his chest.

Harry leapt to his feet and, making sure that he had his bag and the Invisibility Cloak was completely covering him, he wrenched open the door and hurried out of the office after Filch, who was hobbling along faster than Harry had ever seen him go.

One landing down from Umbridge's office and Harry thought it was safe to become visible again; he pulled off the Cloak, shoved it in his bag and hurried onward. There was a great deal of shouting and movement coming from the entrance hall. He ran down the marble staircase and found what looked like most of the school assembled there.

It was just like the night when Trelawney had been sacked. Students were standing all around the walls in a great ring (some of them, Harry noticed, covered in a substance that looked very like Stinksap); teachers and ghosts were also in the crowd. Prominent among the onlookers were members of the Inquisitorial Squad, who were all looking exceptionally pleased with themselves, and Peeves, who was bobbing overhead, gazed down upon Fred and George, who stood in the middle of the floor with the unmistakable look of two people who had just been cornered.

"So!" said Umbridge triumphantly, whom Harry realized was standing just a few stairs in front of him, once more looking down upon her prey. "So . . . you think it amusing to turn a school corridor into a swamp, do you?"

"Pretty amusing, yeah," said Fred, looking back up at her without the slightest sign of fear.

Filch elbowed his way closer to Umbridge, almost crying with happiness.

"I've got the form, Headmistress," he said hoarsely, waving the piece of parchment Harry had just seen him take from her desk. "I've got the form and I've got the whips waiting. . . . Oh, let me do it now . . ."

“Very good, Argus,” she said. “You two,” she went on, gazing down at Fred and George, “are about to learn what happens to wrongdoers in my school.”

“You know what?” said Fred. “I don’t think we are.”

He turned to his twin.

“George,” said Fred, “I think we’ve outgrown full-time education.”

“Yeah, I’ve been feeling that way myself,” said George lightly.

“Time to test our talents in the real world, d’you reckon?” asked Fred.

“Definitely,” said George.

And before Umbridge could say a word, they raised their wands and said together, “*Accio Brooms!*”

Harry heard a loud crash somewhere in the distance. Looking to his left he ducked just in time — Fred and George’s broomsticks, one still trailing the heavy chain and iron peg with which Umbridge had fastened them to the wall, were hurtling along the corridor toward their owners. They turned left, streaked down the stairs, and stopped sharply in front of the twins, the chain clattering loudly on the flagged stone floor.

“We won’t be seeing you,” Fred told Professor Umbridge, swinging his leg over his broomstick.

“Yeah, don’t bother to keep in touch,” said George, mounting his own.

Fred looked around at the assembled students, and at the silent, watchful crowd.

“If anyone fancies buying a Portable Swamp, as demonstrated

upstairs, come to number ninety-three, Diagon Alley — Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes," he said in a loud voice. "Our new premises!"

"Special discounts to Hogwarts students who swear they're going to use our products to get rid of this old bat," added George, pointing at Professor Umbridge.

"STOP THEM!" shrieked Umbridge, but it was too late. As the Inquisitorial Squad closed in, Fred and George kicked off from the floor, shooting fifteen feet into the air, the iron peg swinging dangerously below. Fred looked across the hall at the poltergeist bobbing on his level above the crowd.

"Give her hell from us, Peeves."

And Peeves, whom Harry had never seen take an order from a student before, swept his belled hat from his head and sprang to a salute as Fred and George wheeled about to tumultuous applause from the students below and sped out of the open front doors into the glorious sunset.

Beroepsleiding

“Maar hoekom het jy nie meer Okklumensie-lesse nie?” vra Hermien fronsend.

“Ek sê mos,” brom Harry. “Snerp reken ek ken die beginsels en kan nou op my eie aangaan.”

“Dan kry jy nie meer daardie snaakse drome nie?” vra Hermien skepties.

“Nie eintlik nie,” sê Harry ontwykend.

“Wel, ek dink nie Snerp moet ophou voor jy nie doodseker is jy kan hulle beheer nie!” sê Hermien verontwaardig. “Harry, ek dink jy moet vir hom gaan vra —”

“Nee,” sê Harry beslis. “Los dit, Hermien, oukei?”

Dis die eerste dag van die Paasvakansie en Hermien het soos gewoonlik 'n groot deel van die dag gebruik om vir hulle studieroosters op te stel. Harry en Ron laat haar begaan. Dis makliker as om met haar te stry en wie weet, dit kan dalk nuttig wees.

Ron is geskok toe hy besef daar is nog net ses weke oor voor hul eksamen begin.

“Hoe kan dit vir jou 'n skok wees?” sê Hermien en tik die blokkies op Ron se rooster met haar towerstaf sodat elke vak in 'n ander kleur flits.

“Ek weet nie,” sê Ron, “daar het so baie gebeur.”

“Hierso.” Sy gee die rooster vir hom aan. “As jy hiervolgens werk, sal jy oukei wees.”

Ron kyk nors daarna. Dan verhelder sy gesig.

“Ek het elke week een aand af!”

“Dis vir Kwiddiek,” sê Hermien.

Ron se glimlag verdwyn. “Wat help dit?” sê hy suur. “Ons het nie 'n kat se kans om vanjaar die beker te wen nie. Net so min as wat Pa Minister vir Towerkuns sal word.”

Hermien sê niks. Sy kyk na Harry. Hy staan na die geselskamer se oorkantste muur terwyl Kromskeen na sy hand kap in die hoop dat sy ore gevryf gaan word.

“Wat’s fout, Harry?”

“Wat?” sê Harry vinnig “O, niks.”

Hy gryp sy eksemplaar van *Die Teorie van die Verdedigingstoorkuns* en maak of hy iets in die indeks soek. Kromskeen gee moed op en kruip onder Hermien se stoel in.

“Ek het vroeër vir Cho gesien,” sê Hermien huiwerig. “Sy lyk baie ongelukkig . . . het julle twee weer baklei?”

“Wa – ? O, ja, ons het,” sê Harry vinnig, dankbaar om die ver-skoning te gebruik.

“Waaroor?”

“Daardie klikbekvriendin van haar, Marietta,” sê Harry.

“Ja, wel, ek kan jou nie blameer nie!” sê Ron ergerlik en sit sy studierooster neer. “As dit nie vir haar was nie . . .”

Ron begin om teen Marietta Edgecombe uit te vaar. Dit help Harry baie, want hy hoef net kwaad te lyk, nou en dan te knik en “Ja” en “Net so” te sê wanneer Ron asem skep. Intussen is sy gedagtes vry om selfs nog meer bedruk, te dink oor wat hy in die Peinssif gesien het.

Die herinnering vreet aan hom. Hy was so seker dat sy ouers wonderlike mense was dat hy nog altyd die geniepsige goed kon afskud wat Snerp oor sy pa gesê het. Het mense soos Hagrid en Sirius dan nie vir Harry gesê hoe wonderlik sy pa was nie? (Ja, wel, en kyk hoe was Sirius, sê ’n knaende stemmetjie in sy kop . . . hy was net so erg.) Harry het wel eenkeer vir professor McGonagall hoor sê dat sy pa en Sirius moeilikheidmakers op skool was, maar sy het hulle soos die voorgangers van die Weasley-tweeling laat klink. Harry kan hom nie voorstel dat Fred en George iemand vir die pret onderstebo in die lug sal laat hang nie . . . tensy hulle hom regtig haat . . . dalk Malfoy, of iemand wat werklik daarna soek.

Harry wonder of Snerp dit nie dalk verdien het nie, maar Lily het gesê: “Wat het hy aan jou gedoen?” en toe het James geantwoord: “Dis meer die feit dat hy bestaan, as jy weet wat ek bedoel.” Het James daarmee begin net omdat Sirius gesê het hy is verveeld? Harry onthou dat Lupin in Grimmauldplein gesê het Dompeldorius het hom prefek gemaak in die hoop dat hy vir Sirius en James sou beheer . . . Maar in die Peinssif het hy net daar gesit en niks gedoen nie.

Lily het wel iets gedoen, sê Harry vir homself. Sy ma was ’n goeie mens. Maar die uitdrukking op haar gesig toe sy op James geskree het, pla hom net soveel as enigiets anders. Dis duidelik dat sy nie vir James kon verdra nie. Harry kan nie verstaan hoe hulle ooit kon trou nie. Hy wonder selfs ’n paar keer of James haar dalk gedwing

het . . .

Vir amper vyf jaar was die gedagte aan sy pa vir hom 'n bron van troos en inspirasie. Hy het nog altyd gegloei van trots as iemand vir hom sê hy is soos sy pa. En nou . . . nou voel hy koud en miserabel as hy aan sy pa dink.

Die weer raak windriger, sonniger en warmer soos die Paasvakansie aanstap, maar Harry en die res van die vyfde- en sewendejaars moet soos gevangenes binne bly om te hersien en gedurig na die biblioteek gaan. Harry gee voor dat sy slegte bui die gevolg van die komende eksamen is en aangesien sy mede-Griffindors net so siek en sat van studeer is, kom niemand iets agter nie.

"Harry, ek praat met jou, kan jy my hoor?"

"Hê?"

Hy kyk om. 'n Windverwaalde Ginny het langs hom by die biblioteektafel kom sit. Dis Sondagaand laat en hy is alleen. Hermien is reeds terug na die Griffindor-toring om Antieke Runes te hersien en Ron oefen Kwiddiek.

"O, hallo," sê Harry en stoot sy boeke uit die pad. "Hoekom oefen jy nie?"

"Die oefening is verby. Ron moes vir Jack Sloper siekeboeg toe vat."

"Vir wat?"

"Wel, ons is nie seker nie, maar ons *dink* hy't homself met sy kolf uitgeslaan." Sy sug swaar. "In elk geval . . . hier's 'n pakkie. Dit het net-net deur Umbridge se nuwe siftingsproses gekom."

Sy sit 'n pakkie wat in bruinpapier toegedraai is op die tafel. Dis duidelik oopgemaak en weer slordig toegedraai. Bo-op is 'n nota in rooi ink: *Geïnspekteer en goedgekeur deur die Hogwarts Hoë Ondersoeker.*

"Dis Paaseiers van Ma," sê Ginny. "Daar's vir jou ook een . . . hier-so."

Sy hou 'n mooi eier uit, versier met klein Snippies van versiersuiker. Volgens die verpakking is daar 'n sakkie Sissende Sisbees binne-in. Harry staar daarna en besef tot sy skok dat hy 'n knop in sy keel kry.

"Is jy oukei, Harry?" vra Ginny sag.

"Ja, ek's oukei," sê Harry skor verby die knop in sy keel. Hy kan nie verstaan hoekom 'n Paaseier hom só laat voel nie.

"Jy lyk die laaste tyd baie af. Weet jy, ek is seker as jy net met Cho sal praat . . ."

"Ek wil nie met Cho praat nie," sê Harry kortaf.

"Nou met wie dan?" Ginny kyk stip na hom.

"Ek . . ."

Hy kyk rond om seker te maak dat niemand luister nie. Madame Pince is 'n paar rakke daarvandaan besig om 'n stapel boeke vir 'n angstige Hanna Abbott te stempel.

"Ek wens ek kon met Sirius praat," prewel Harry. "Maar ek weet ek kan nie."

Ginny kyk ingedagte na hom terwyl hy sy Paaseier oopmaak, 'n stuk albreek en in sy mond steek, meer om iets te doen as omdat hy regtig daarvoor lus het.

"Wel," sê Ginny en breek vir haar ook 'n stuk af, "as jy regtig met Sirius wil praat, moet daar 'n manier wees."

"Komaan," sê Harry. "Met Umbridge wat die vure dophou en al ons pos lees?"

"Die ding van saam met Fred en George grootword," sê Ginny ingedagte, "is dat jy later glo jy kan enigiets doen as jy regtig wil."

Harry kyk na haar en sy moed styg effens. Dalk is dit die sjokolade – Lupin het destyds gesê hy moet sjokolade eet ná 'n onderonsie met die Dementors – of dalk is dit omdat hy uiteindelik hardop gesê het waaroor hy al weke lank loop en broei.

"WAT GAAN HIER AAN?"

"O goeie," fluister Ginny en spring orent. "Ek het skoon vergeet –"

Madame Pince storm op hulle af, haar verrimpelde gesig vertrek van woede.

"Sjokolade in die biblioteek!" skree sy. "Uit – uit – UIT!"

Sy pluk haar towerstaf uit en toor Harry se boeke, sak en inkbottel om hom en Ginny uit die biblioteek te jaag en hulle in die hardloop oor die kop te slaan.

Die belangrikheid van die komende eksamen word beklemtoon deur die groot aantal pamflette, inligtingstukke en kennisgewings oor towenaarsloophane wat kort voor die einde van die vakansie op die tafels in die Griffindor-toring verskyn. Daar is ook 'n groot kennisgewing teen die kennisgewingbord.

BEROEPSLEIDING

Daar word van alle vyfdejaars verwag om in die eerste week van die somerkwartaal 'n kort vergadering met die Hoof van hul Huis by te woon om toekomstige loophane te bespreek. Die tye is soos volg:

Harry bestudeer die lys en sien dat hy Maandagnmiddag om halfdrie in professor McGonagall se kantoor moet wees. Dit beteken hy gaan feitlik die hele Waarsêery-les by Firenze mis.

Hy en die ander vyfdejaars bestee die grootste deel van die laaste naweek van die Paasvakansie om die loopbaanpamflette te lees.

"Wel, ek weet nie van heling nie," sê Ron die laaste aand van die vakansie. Hy is verdiep in 'n pamflet met Sint Mungo se gekruiste been en towerstaf voorop. "Dit staan hier dat jy minstens 'n O op OTTe-vlak vir Towerdrankies, Herbologie, Transfigurasie, Tower-spreuke en Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste moet hê. Ek bedoel . . . jissou . . . hulle vra nie baie nie, hè?"

"Wel, dis 'n baie verantwoordelike werk," sê Hermien ingedagte. Sy lees 'n helderpienk-en-oranje pamflet met die opskrif: SAL JY DAARVAN HOU OM IN MOGGELBETREKKINGE TE WERK? "Ek sien jy't nie veel nodig as jy met Moggels wil werk nie. Al wat hulle wil hê, is 'n UIL in Moggelstudies: Van baie groter belang is jou entoesiasme, geduld en sin vir humor!"

"Jy het meer as 'n goeie sin vir humor nodig as jy met my oom wil werk," sê Harry. "Wat van 'n goeie sin vir wanneer om te kies?" Hy is amper halfpad met 'n brosjure oor die towenaarsbankwese. "Luister hierna: Is jy op soek na 'n uitdagende loopbaan wat reis, avontuur en aansienlike bonusse vir die vind van skatte behels, wat gevaarlik kan wees? Oorweeg gerus 'n loopbaan by die Edelgolt Towenaarsbank, wat tans op soek is na Vloekbrekers vir opwindende geleenthede oorsee . . . Hulle wil Rekenmatiek hê. Jy kan dit doen, Hermien!"

"Ek hou nie eintlik van die bankwese nie," sê Hermien wat verdiep is in DINK JY JY KAN SEKERHEIDSTROLLE AFRIG?

"Haai," sê 'n stem by Harry se oor. Hy kyk om. Fred en George het by hulle aangesluit. "Ginny het met ons oor jou gepraat," sê Fred en sit sy voete op die tafel voor hom sodat etlike pamflette oor loopbane in die Ministerie vir Towerkuns op die vloer val. "Sy sê jy wil met Sirius praat."

"Wat?" sê Hermien skril en haar hand, wat op pad was om SLAAN 'N SLAG BY DIE DEPARTEMENT VIR MAGIESE ONGELUKKE EN KATASTROFES op te tel, vries in die lug.

"Ja . . ." sê Harry en hy probeer ongeërg klink, "ja, ek wil nogal graag –"

"Moenie verspot wees nie!" Hermien sit penregop en staar ongelowig na hom. "Met Umbridge wat in die vure rondkrap en al die uile bevoel?"

"Wel, daar is dalk 'n manier om dit te vermy," sê George. Hy rek hom uit en glimlag. "Jy moet net die aandag aflei. Julle het seker agtergekom dat ons tydens die Paasvakansie baie stil was?"

"Soos ons geredeneer het: Wat is die punt om ons eie vrye tyd te ontwig?" sê Fred. "Hoegenaamd niks, natuurlik. En dit sou mense

se hersieningsprogramme ook omkrap en dis die laaste ding wat ons wil doen."

Hy knik vroom vir Hermien, wat uit die veld geslaan lyk deur hierdie onverwagse bedagsaamheid.

"Maar van môre af gaan dinge weer hulle gewone gang," sê Fred flink. "En as ons in elk geval 'n bietjie amok gaan maak, kan ons dit net sowel so beplan dat Harry met Sirius kan gesels."

"Ja, maar *nogtans*," sê Hermien asof sy iets baie eenvoudigs vir iemand wat baie dom is, moet verduidelik. "Selfs al lei julle die aandag af, hoe gaan Harry met hom praat?"

"In Umbridge se kantoor," sê Harry sag.

Hy dink al langer as twee weke hieroor en dis die enigste oplossing waarmee hy vorendag kan kom. Umbridge het immers self vir hom gesê haar vuur is die enigste een wat nie dopgehou word nie.

"Is – jy – mal?" sê Hermien geskok.

Ron laat sak die pamflet oor werksgeleenthede in die Swam-verbouingsbedryf en kyk onrustig na hulle.

"Ek dink nie so nie," sê Harry en haal sy skouers op.

"Hoe gaan jy inkom?"

Harry is gereed vir die vraag.

"Met Sirius se mes."

"Wat?"

"Sirius het Kersfees vir my 'n mes gegee wat enige slot kan oopmaak. Selfs al het sy haar deur getoor sodat *Alohomora* nie werk nie, wat ek seker is sy het –"

"Wat dink jy hiervan?" vra Hermien vir Ron, en Harry kan nie help om mevrou Weasley se woorde aan meneer Weasley te onthou tydens sy eerste aandete by Grimmauldplein nie.

"Ek weet nie," sê Ron, wat glad nie lus lyk om 'n mening te waag nie. "As Harry dit wil doen, is dit seker sy saak, of hoe?"

"Dis hoe 'n Weasley-bek moet praat," sê Fred en klap vir Ron hard op die rug. "Nou ja, ons dink aan môremiddag net ná skool. Dit sal die grootste impak hê as almal in die gange is. Harry, ons sal dit iewers in die oostelike vleuel doen en haar ver van haar kantoor af lok – ek reken ons kan jou 'n goeie twintig minute waarborg, hê?" Hy kyk na George.

"Maklik," sê George.

"Wat gaan julle doen?" vra Ron.

"Jy sal môre sien, kleinboet," sê Fred toe hy en George opstaan. "Wel, as jy sorg dat jy vyfuur in Gregorius Grootbek se gang is."

Toe Harry die volgende oggend wakker word, is hy amper net so bang soos die dag toe hy vir sy dissiplinêre verhoor na die Ministerie vir Towerkuns moes gaan. Dis nie net die vooruitsig aan die inbraak by Umbridge se kantoor en die feit dat hy haar vuur gaan gebruik om met Sirius te praat wat sy senuwees op hol jaag nie, hoewel dit al erg genoeg is. Hy gaan vandag vir die eerste keer naby Snerp wees sedert Snerp hom uit sy kantoor gejaag het.

Harry lê 'n rukkie in sy bed en dink oor die dag wat voorlê voor hy stilletjies opstaan, na die venster langs Neville se bed stap en oor die terrein uitkyk. Dis 'n lieflike oggend en die lug is 'n helder opaalblou. Hy sien die tamaai berkeboom waar sy pa vir Snerp gekoggel het onder hom. Hy twyfel of Sirius vir hom iets kan sê wat hom beter sal laat voel oor wat hy in die Peinssif gesien het, maar hy móet Sirius se weergawe hoor. Hy moet weet of daar enige versagtende omstandighede of verskonings vir sy pa se gedrag was.

Iets vang Harry se oog: 'n beweging aan die kant van die Verbode Woud. Hy trek sy oë op skrefies teen die vroegoggendson. Dis Hagrid wat tussen die bome uitstap en dit lyk of hy kruppel loop. Hy steier na sy hut en gaan in. Harry hou die hut vir 'n hele paar minute dop, maar Hagrid kom nie weer uit nie, en daar draai 'n rokie bo die skoorsteen. Hagrid is dus nie so erg beseer dat hy nie sy vuur kan stook nie.

Harry draai weg, gaan na sy trommel en begin aantrek.

Met die inbraak by Umbridge se kantoor in die vooruitsig het Harry nie verwag die dag gaan glad verloop nie, maar hy het nie rekening gehou met Hermien se volgehoue pogings om hom te oorreed om sy planne vir vyfuur te laat vaar nie. Sy gee vir die eerste keer ooit net so min aandag soos Harry en Ron in professor Binns se klas oor Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns. Sy onderwerp Harry aan 'n rits gefluisterde waarskuwings wat hy sy bes doen om te ignoreer.

“en as sy jou daar vang, sal jy nie net geskors word nie, sy sal ook weet dat jy met Snuffels gepraat het, en hierdie keer sal sy jou dwing om Veritaserum te drink en haar vrae te beantwoord!”

“Hermien,” sê Ron sag en verontwaardig, “gaan jy ophou om met Harry te raas en na Binns luister, of moet ek my eie notas maak?”

“Maak jy 'n slag notas, dit kan jou net goed doen.”

Toe hulle in Snerp se kerker kom, praat Harry en Ron nie meer met Hermien nie. Sy steur haar nie daaraan nie, maar gebruik die stilte om nog waarskuwings in 'n sissende stem te fluister, sodat Septimus vir 'n volle vyf minute na 'n lekplek in sy hekseketel soek.

Snerp tree op asof Harry onsigbaar geword het. Gelukkig is Harry

gewoond daaraan – dis oom Vernon se gunstelingtaktiek en nie naastenby so erg soos Snerp se gewone snedige getart nie. Dis vir Harry 'n groot verligting om sy towerdrankie vir 'n verandering in vrede te maak. Toe hy aan die einde van die klas die Verfrissingsdrankie in 'n fles skep, met 'n kurk toemaak en na Snerp se lesse-naar neem om gemerk te word, voel hy dat hy uiteindelik dalk 'n U sal kry.

Hy het net omgedraai toe hy 'n harde slag hoor. Malfoy lag smalend en Harry swaai om. Sy fles lê in stukke op die vloer en Snerp kyk met leedvermakerige plesier na hom.

“Oeps,” sê hy gedemp. “Nog 'n nul, Potter.”

Harry is te kwaad om te antwoord. Hy stap na sy hekseketel om 'n tweede fles vol te maak en vir Snerp te dwing om dit te merk, maar tot sy ontnugtering het die inhoud verdwyn.

“Ek's jammer!” sê Hermien, haar hande oor haar mond. “Ek's regtig jammer, Harry. Ek dag jy's klaar, toe't ek opgeruim!”

Harry is te kwaad om iets te sê. Toe die klok lui, maak hy hom uit die voete sonder om terug te kyk. Hy sorg dat hy 'n sitplek tussen Neville en Septimus kry sodat Hermien nie weer oor die gebruik van Umbridge se kantoor aan hom kan torring nie.

Hy is in so 'n slegte bui toe hy by Waarsêery kom dat hy skoon van sy afspraak met professor McGonagall vergeet en eers onthou toe Ron wil weet hoekom hy nie in haar kantoor is nie. Hy laat spaander soontoe en kom uitasem daar aan, net 'n paar minute laat.

“Jammer, Professor,” hyg hy toe hy die deur toemaak. “Ek het vergeet.”

“Dit maak nie saak nie, Potter,” sê sy kortaf net toe iemand anders in die vertrek snuif. Harry kyk om.

Professor Umbridge sit met haar aanknipbord gereed op haar knie, 'n opgesmukte valletjie om haar nek en 'n aaklige selfvoldane glimlaggie op haar gesig.

“Sit, Potter,” sê professor McGonagall kortaf en skuif die pamplette op haar tafel rond met hande wat effens bewe.

Harry gaan sit met sy rug na Umbridge en probeer hard om te maak of hy nie haar veerpen op haar aanknipbord hoor krap nie.

“Wel, Potter, die gedagte is om enige loopbaanidees wat jy het, te bespreek en jou te help met jou vakkeuses vir jou sesde en sewende jaar,” sê professor McGonagall. “Het jy enige idee wat jy na Hogwarts wil doen?”

“Hm – ” sê Harry, wat die gekrap agter hom baie irriterend vind.

“Ja?” moedig professor McGonagall hom aan.

"Wel, ek het gedink om 'n Auror te word," mompel Harry.

"Daarvoor sal jy uitstekende punte moet hê." Professor McGonagall haal 'n klein pamfletjie onder die massa papiere op haar tafel uit en vou dit oop. "Hulle vereis 'n minimum van vyf OTTe en niks onder 'Oortref Verwagtinge' nie. Dan moet jy ook 'n veeleisende reeks persoonlikheids- en aanlegtoetse by die Auror-kantoor aflê. Dis 'n moeilike paadjie, Potter, hulle aanvaar net die heel bestes. Om die waarheid te sê, ek kan aan niemand dink wat die afgelope drie jaar die paal gehaal het nie."

Professor Umbridge kies hierdie oomblik om 'n kuggie te gee wat blykbaar so sag moontlik moet klink. Professor McGonagall ignoreer haar.

"Jy wil seker weet watter vakke jy moet neem?" gaan sy voort, 'n bietjie harder as tevore.

"Ja," sê Harry. "Seker Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste?"

"Natuurlik," sê professor McGonagall flink. "Ek sal jou ook aanraai –"

Professor Umbridge kug weer, hierdie keer 'n bietjie harder. Professor McGonagall maak haar oë 'n oomblik toe, voor sy hulle weer oopmaak en voortgaan asof niks gebeur het nie.

"Ek sal jou ook aanraai om Transfigurasië te neem omdat Aurors dikwels in hul werk moet Transfigureer of Onttransfigureer. En ek sê nou vir jou, Potter, ek neem net dié studente wat 'Oortref Verwagtinge' of hoër in hul Uitsonderlike Intellektuele Liga behaal het. Ek sou sê jy's op die oomblik 'Aanvaarbaar'. Jy sal jou dus deeglik vir die eksamen moet voorberei. Dan moet jy ook Towerspreuke hê, dis altyd nuttig, en Towerdrankies. Ja, Potter, Towerdrankies," voeg sy met 'n effense glimlaggie by. "Gifstowwe en teenmiddels is noodsaaklike kennis vir Aurors. En professor Snorp weier om studente te aanvaar wat nie minstens 'Uitstekend' in hul U1Le behaal het nie, dus –"

Professor Umbridge kug hard.

"Kan ek vir jou 'n hoesklontjie gee, Dolores?" vra professor McGonagall kortaf sonder om na professor Umbridge te kyk.

"O nee, baie dankie," sê Umbridge met daardie soet stemmetjie wat Harry so haat. "Ek het net gewonder of ek jou vir 'n klein oomblikkie in die rede kan val, Minerva?"

"Daar's seker niks wat ek daaraan kan doen nie," sê professor McGonagall deur haar tande.

"Ek het gewonder of meneer Potter *werklik* die temperament vir 'n Auror het," sê professor Umbridge soet.

"O, het jy?" sê professor McGonagall kil. "Wel, Potter," gaan sy voort asof daar geen onderbreking was nie, "as hierdie ambisie jou

erns is, beveel ek aan dat jy moeite doen om Transfigurasië en Towerdrankies op standaard te kry. Ek sien professor Flickerpitt het jou die afgelope twee jaar tussen 'Aanvaarbaar' en 'Oortref Verwagtinge' gegee, dus lyk dit of jou Towerspreuke bevredigend is. Wat Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste betref, was jou punte oor die algemeen hoog. Veral professor Lupin het gereken dat jy – is jy heeltemal seker jy wil nie 'n hoësklontjie hê nie, Dolores?"

"Nee dankie, Minerva," sê professor Umbridge, wat so pas baie hard gekug het. "Dit klink of jy nie Harry se mees onlangse punte vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste voor jou het nie. Ek is seker ek het vir jou 'n nota gestuur."

"Wat – dit?" sê professor McGonagall in 'n gewalgde stem. Sy trek 'n vel pienk perkament uit Harry se lêer en staan met geligte wenkbroue daarna. Dan sit sy dit sonder kommentaar terug.

"Nou ja, soos ek gesê het, Potter, professor Lupin het gedink dat jy 'n besondere aanleg vir die vak toon en as Auror –"

"Verstaan jy nie my nota nie, Minerva?" vra professor Umbridge in haar heuningsoet stemmetjie. Sy vergeet skoon om eers te kug.

"Natuurlik verstaan ek dit," sê professor McGonagall deur kake wat so styf op mekaar geklem is dat die woorde gesmoord klink.

"Wel, dan weet ek nie. Ek's bevrees ek weet nie hoe jy vir meneer Potter vals hoop kan gee –"

"Vals hoop?" herhaal professor McGonagall, wat nog steeds weier om na professor Umbridge te kyk. "Hy het hoë punte in al sy toetse vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste behaal –"

"Ek is jammer om jou te moet teengaan, Minerva, maar soos jy op my nota kan sien, het Harry baie swak by my gevaar –"

"Ek moes dit duideliker gestel het," sê professor McGonagall en kyk Umbridge vol in die oë. "Hy het hoë punte behaal in al die toetse vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste wat deur bekwame onderwysers opgestel is."

Professor Umbridge se glimlag verdwyn so skielik soos 'n gloeilamp wat blaas. Sy sit terug in haar stoel, plaas 'n skoon bladsy op haar aanknipbord en begin baie vinnig skryf sodat haar uitpeuloë heen en weer rol. Professor McGonagall kyk weer na Harry. Haar dun neusvleuels bewe en haar oë glinster gevaarlik.

"Enige vrae, Potter?"

"Ja," sê Harry. "Watter soort persoonlikheids- en aanlegtoetse sal die Ministerie doen as jy genoeg OTTe het?"

"Wel, jy moet bewys dat jy onder druk kan reageer en so aan," sê professor McGonagall. "Deursettingsvermoë en toewyding is belangrik omdat Auror-opleiding 'n verdere drie jaar neem, asook hoe

vaardighede in praktiese Verdediging. Dit beteken dus heelwat naschoolse studiejare en as jy nie bereid is –

“Ek dink jy sal vind,” sê Umbridge in ’n yskoue stem, “dat die Ministerie ná die rekords kyk van die mense wat aansoek doen om Aurors te word. Hulle kriminele rekords.”

“– indien jy nie bereid is om ná Hogwarts verdere eksamens af te lê nie, moet jy eerder na ’n ander –”

“Wat beteken dat hierdie seun se kans om ’n Auror te word net so groot is as Dompeldorius s’n om na hierdie skool terug te keer.”

“Dit is dus ’n baie goeie kans,” sê professor McGonagall.

“Potter het ’n kriminele rekord,” sê Umbridge hard.

“Potter is vrygespreek op alle aanklagte,” sê professor McGonagall nog harder.

Professor Umbridge staan op. Sy is so kort dat dit nie juis ’n verskil maak nie, maar haar bemoeisieke, stroperige manier het plek gemaak vir ’n harde woede wat haar bree gesig dreigend laat lyk.

“Potter sal nooit ’n Auror word nie!”

Professor McGonagall staan ook op en in haar geval is dit indrukwekkend: sy troon oor professor Umbridge.

“Potter,” sê professor McGonagall in ’n klokhelder stem, “ek sal alles in my vermoë doen om jou te help om ’n Auror te word! Al moet ek jou elke nag persoonlik afrig! Ek sal sorg dat jy die gewenste punte behaal!”

“Die Minister vir Towerkuns sal nooit vir Harry Potter in diens neem nie!” sê Umbridge en haar stem styg ergerlik.

“Daar is dalk ’n nuwe Minister vir Towerkuns teen die tyd dat Potter gereed is om daar te gaan werk!” skree professor McGonagall.

“Aha!” gil professor Umbridge en wys met ’n stomp vinger na professor McGonagall. “Ja! Ja, ja, ja! Natuurlik! Dis wat jy wil hê, nie waar nie, Minerva McGonagall? Jy wil hê Cornelius Broddelwerk moet deur Albus Dompeldorius vervang word! Jy wil wees waar ek nou is: Senior Ondersekretaresse van die Minister en boonop Skoolhoof!”

“Jy yl,” sê professor McGonagall minagtend. “Potter, dis die einde van ons loopbaankonsultasie.”

Harry swaai sy sak oor sy skouer en stap vinnig uit. Hy waag dit nie om na professor Umbridge te kyk nie en is al onder in die gang toe hy nog hoor hoe sy en professor McGonagall op mekaar skree.

Toe professor Umbridge ’n rukkie later in die klaskamer vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste instap, haal sy nog steeds swaar asem.

“Ek hoop julle het besluit om nie met jul planne voort te gaan nie, Harry,” fluister Hermien die oomblik toe hulle hul boeke by

"Hoofstuk Vier-en-dertig, Nievergelding en Onderhandeling" oopgemaak het. "Umbridge is al klaar in 'n slegte bui."

Umbridge gluur elke nou en dan na Harry, wat kop omlaag met onsiende oë na *Die Teorie van die Verdedigingstoorkuns* staar terwyl hy wonder wat gaan gebeur.

Hy kan hom net voorstel hoe professor McGonagall gaan reageer as hy, 'n paar uur nadat sy hom verdedig het, in professor Umbridge se kantoor betrap moet word. Daar is niks wat hom keer om net eenvoudig terug te gaan na die Griffindor-toring en te hoop dat hy in die somervakansie vir Sirius oor die toneel in die Peinssif kan uitvra nie. Niks, behalwe dat hy by die gedagte voel of 'n loodswaar gewig in sy maag geval het. En wat van Fred en George wat reeds die insident beplan het? Om nie te praat van die mes wat Sirius vir hom gegee het en wat al klaar by sy pa se onsigbaarheidsmantel in sy skoolsak is nie.

Maar die feit bly staan, as hy gevang word.

"Dompeldorius het 'n groot opoffering gemaak sodat jy in die skool kan bly, Harry!" fluister Hermien met haar boek voor haar gesig sodat Umbridge nie moet sien nie. "As jy vandag uitgeskop word, sal dit vergeefs gewees het!"

Hy kan die plan laat vaar en bloot leer om saam te leef met die herinnering aan wat sy pa meer as twintig jaar gelede op 'n somerdag gedoen het.

Hy onthou vir Sirius in die vuur bo in die Griffindor-geselskamer.

Jy's minder soos jou pa as wat ek gedink het. Vir James sou die risiko pret gewees het.

Maar wil hy nog soos sy pa wees?

"Harry, moet dit nie doen nie!" sê Hermien in 'n angstige stem toe die klok aan die einde van die periode lui.

Harry antwoord nie. Hy weet nie wat om te doen nie.

Ron is skynbaar vasberade om geen mening of raad te gee nie. Hy weier om na Harry te kyk, maar toe Hermien weer haar mond oopmaak, sê hy kwaai: "Hou nou op, oukei? Hy moet self besluit."

Harry stap met 'n kloppende hart uit die klaskamer. Hy is in die middel van die gang toe hy die onmiskenbare geluide hoor wat op die een of ander opskudding dui. Wilde krete en 'n geskree weer-galm iewers bokant hom. Studente wat uit die klaskamers stroom, steek vas en kyk benoud na die plafon.

Umbridge storm uit haar kantoor so vinnig as wat haar kort bene haar kan dra. Sy pluk haar towerstaf uit terwyl sy haastig in die gang af draf.

Dis nou of nooit.

"Harry – asseblief!" smeek Hermien.

Maar hy het reeds besluit. Hy hys sy sak hoër oor sy skouer en vleg deur die skare mense wat almal na die oostelike vleuel hardloop om te sien wat aangaan.

Die gang voor Umbridge se kantoor is spoedig verlate. Harry waag nie kanse nie. Hy glip agter 'n groot wapenrusting – wat sy kop krekend draai en na hom kyk – in, pluk sy sak oop, ruk Sirius se mes uit en gooi die onsigbaarheidsmantel oor hom. Toe kruip hy versigtig agter die wapenrusting uit en af in die gang na Umbridge se deur.

Hy druk die towermes se lem in die gleuf langs die kosyn, wikkel dit versigtig op en af en trek dit suutjies uit. Daar is 'n klikgeluid en die deur swaai oop. Hy glip by die kantoor in, maak die deur vinnig agter hom toe en kyk rond.

Niks roer nie, behalwe die walglike katjies op die muurborde bo die gekonfiskeerde besems.

Harry haal sy mantel af en stap na die kaggel. Hy kry binne sekondes wat hy soek: 'n dosie glinsterende Floo-poeier.

Hy hurk met bewende hande voor die leë kaggel. Hy het *dit* nog nooit tevore gedoen nie, maar hy dink hy weet hoe dit werk. Hy steek sy kop in die kaggel, neem 'n groterige knypie poeier en laat val dit op die stompe wat netjies in die kaggel gepak is. Hulle bars onmiddellik uit in smaraggroen vlamme.

"Grimmauldplein nommer 12!" sê Harry hard en duidelik.

Dis een van die vreemdste sensasies wat hy nog ooit gevoel het. Hy het al vantevore met Floo-poeier gereis, maar toe het sy hele liggaam in die vlamme deur die netwerk van towenaarskaggels getol. Hierdie keer bly sy knieë op Umbridge se koue kantoorvloer agter en net sy kop tol deur die groen vuur . . .

Die getol is net so vinnig verby as wat dit begin het. Hy voel effens naar en dis of 'n besonder warm serp om sy kop gewikkel is. Harry maak sy oë oop. Hy is in die kombuis se vuurherd en sien die lang houttafel waar iemand 'n stuk perkament sit en lees.

"Sirius?"

Die man wip en swaai om. Dis nie Sirius nie, maar Lupin.

"Harry!" sê hy geskok. "Wat doen jy – wat het gebeur, is alles reg?"

"Ja," sê Harry. "Ek het gewonder – ek bedoel, ek wil graag met Sirius praat."

"Ek sal hom gaan roep," sê Lupin deur die wind en staan op. "Hy's boontoe om vir Skepsel te gaan soek, dit lyk of dié al weer in die solder wegkruip . . ."

Harry sien hoe Lupin hom uit die kombuis haas. Nou is daar niks om na te kyk nie behalwe die stoel en die tafelpote. Hy wonder hoekom Sirius nooit vir hom gesê het hoe ongemaklik dit is om uit die vuur te praat nie. Sy knieë is klaar seer van op Umbridge se harde klipvloer kniel.

Lupin kom kort daarna terug met Sirius op sy hakke.

“Wat gaan aan?” vra Sirius bekommerd. Hy vee sy lang donker hare uit sy oë en gaan sit voor die vuur sodat hy in Harry se oë kyk.

Lupin kniel ook, ’n besorgde trek op sy gesig. “Is jy oukei? Het jy hulp nodig?”

“Nee,” sê Harry, “dis nie so iets nie. . . . Sirius, ek wil met jou praat . . . oor my pa.”

Die twee mans kyk verbaas na mekaar, maar Harry het nie tyd om verlee of ongemaklik te voel nie. ’n Goeie vyf minute moet reeds verby wees en die tweeling het net twintig minute gewaarborg. Hy val dus dadelik weg met sy weergawe van wat hy in die Peinssif gesien het.

Toe hy klaar is, bly Sirius en Lupin albei ’n rukkie stil voor Lupin sê: “Ek dink nie jy moet jou pa oordeel op wat jy daar gesien het nie, Harry. Hy was net vyftien –”

“Ek is ook vyftien!” sê Harry omgekrap.

“Luister, Harry,” paai Sirius, “James en Snerp het mekaar van die begin af gehaat, dit was net een van daai dinge, jy kan dit darem seker verstaan? Ek dink James was alles wat Snerp graag wou wees. Hy was gewild, hy was goed met Kwiddiek – goed met amper alles. En Snerp was hierdie snaakse kêrel en tot oor sy ore in die Donker Kunste, terwyl James – wat jy ook al van hom mag dink, Harry, hy’t die Donker Kunste gehaat.”

“Ja,” sê Harry, “maar hy’t vir Snerp sonder rede aangeval, net omdat – wel, omdat jy gesê het jy’s verveeld.”

“Ek is nie trots daarop nie,” sê Sirius vinnig.

Lupin kyk sydelings na Sirius en dan sê hy: “Luister, Harry, jy moet verstaan dat jou pa en Sirius uitgeblink het in alles wat hulle aangepak het. Hulle was die gewildste ouens in die skool, so as hulle soms ’n bietjie meegevoer geraak het –”

“Jy bedoel ons was soms twee opgeblase windsakke,” sê Sirius. Lupin glimlag.

“Hy’t sy hare die hele tyd deurmekaar gekrap,” sê Harry in ’n gekwelde stem.

Sirius en Lupin lag.

“Ek het dit al skoon vergeet.” Sirius klink effens aangedaan.

“Het hy met die Snip gespeel?” vra Lupin gretig.

"Ja," sê Harry en kyk onbegrypends na Sirius en Lupin, wat na mekaar kyk en nostalgies glimlag. "Wel, ek het gedink hy's 'n bietjie van 'n idioot."

"Natuurlik was hy 'n bietjie van 'n idioot!" sê Sirius, "ons almal was idiote! Wel – nie Maantjie so danig nie," erken hy en kyk na Lupin.

Maar Lupin skud sy kop. "Het ek ooit vir julle gesê om vir Snerp uit te los? Het ek ooit die moed gehad om vir julle te sê julle moet ophou?"

"Ja, wel," sê Sirius, "jy het ons soms laat skaam voel – dis darem iets."

"En," hou Harry vol, vasberade om alles te sê wat hom pla nou – dat hy die kans het, "hy't die hele tyd na die meisies by die meer geloer asof hy hoop hulle kyk vir hom!"

"Ag wel, hy was maar altyd 'n bietjie simpel as Lily in die rondte was," sê Sirius skouerophalend, "hy't altyd vreeslik aangegaan."

"Hoekom het sy met hom getrou?" vra Harry bedruk. "Sy't hom gehaat!"

"Nee, dis darem nie waar nie," sê Sirius.

"Sy't in haar sewende jaar met hom begin uitgaan," sê Lupin.

"Toe James se kop al 'n bietjie afgeblaas het," sê Sirius.

"En toe hy nie meer mense vir die lekker getoor het nie," sê Lupin.

"Selfs vir Snerp?" vra Harry.

"Wel," sê Lupin stadig, "Snerp was 'n spesiale geval. Ek bedoel, hy't geen kans laat verbygaan om vir James te toor nie. Jy kan nie verwag dat James dit sommer net moes verdra nie."

"En my ma het nie omgee nie?"

"Om nou eerlik te wees, sy't nie eintlik geweet nie," sê Sirius. "Ek bedoel, James het darem nie vir Snerp saamgevat as hulle uitgaan en hom voor haar getoor nie."

Sirius frons vir Harry, wat nog steeds onseker lyk.

"Luister," sê hy, "jou pa was die beste vriend wat ek ooit kon hê. Hy was 'n goeie ou. Baie mense is idiote as hulle vyftien is. Hy't dit later ontgroeï."

"Ja, oukei," sê Harry swaarmoedig. "Ek het net nooit gedink ek sal vir Snerp jammer wees nie."

"Gepraat van Snerp," sê Lupin met 'n effense frons tussen sy wenbroue. "Wat het hy gemaak toe hy uitvind dat jy alles gesien het?"

"Hy't gesê hy gaan nie meer vir my. Okklumensie leer nie," sê Harry ongeërg, "asof dit 'n groot teleurstel –"

"Hy het WAT?" skree Sirius sodat Harry wip en 'n mond vol as inasem.

"Is jy seker, Harry?" vra Lupin vinnig. "Gee hy nie meer vir jou les nie?"

"Ja," sê Harry, verbaas oor hulle oordrewe reaksie. "Maar dis oukei, ek gee nie om nie, dis eintlik nogal 'n verligting –"

"Ek sal soontoe gaan en vir Snerp gaan sien!" sê Sirius driftig en hy begin opstaan, maar Lupin druk hom terug.

"As iemand met Snerp gaan praat, sal dit ek wees!" sê hy ferm. "Harry, jy moet dadelik teruggaan en vir Snerp sê hy mag onder geen omstandighede ophou met jou lesse nie. As Dompeldorius dit hoor –"

"Ek kan dit nie vir hom sê nie, hy sal my vermoor!" sê Harry verontwaardig. "Julle't nie gesien hoe hy lyk toe ek uit daardie Peinssif kom nie."

"Harry, niks is belangriker as dat jy Okklumensie leer nie!" sê Lupin streng. "Verstaan jy? Niks!"

"Oukei, oukei," sê Harry tegelyk moedeloos en vererg. "Ek . . . ek sal iets probeer sê . . . maar dit sal nie –"

Hy word stil. Hy hoor voetstappe in die verte.

"Is dit Skepsel wat met die trappe afkom?"

"Nee," sê Sirius en kyk om. "Dit moet iemand aan jou kant wees."

Harry se hart mis 'n paar slae.

"Ek moet gaan!" sê hy en trek sy kop uit die Grimmauldvuurherd. Dit voel vir 'n oomblik of sy kop op sy skouers tol, dan staan hy op sy knieë voor Umbridge se vuur en kyk hoe die smaraggroen vlamme flikkerend doodgaan.

"Gou maak, gou maak!" hoor hy 'n aamborstige stem voor die kantoordeur prewel. "A, sy't dit oopgelos –"

Harry duik na die onsigbaarheidsmantel en het dit net oor hom gegooi toe Fillis inbars, duidelik in sy noppies. Hy praat koorsig met homself terwyl hy na Umbridge se lessenaar draf, 'n laai oopruk en deur die papiere vroetel.

"Goedkeuring vir lyfstraf . . . Goedkeuring vir lyfstraf . . . ek mag dit uiteindelik doen . . . dit sal hulle leer!"

Hy trek 'n stuk perkament uit wat hy soen voor hy dit teen sy bors vasdruk en vinnig by die deur uitslof.

Harry spring orent en sorg dat die onsigbaarheidsmantel hom heeltemal bedek voor hy die deur oopmaak. Hy glip uit die kantoor en draf agter Fillis aan, wat vinniger hobbels as wat Harry hom nog ooit sien doen het.

Een trapportaal van Umbridge se kantoor af reken Harry dis

veilig om weer sigbaar te word. Hy haal die mantel af, steek dit in sy sak en draf verder. Daar is 'n groot gewoel en gewemel in die ingangsportaal. Hy hardloop met die marmertappe af en sien dat feitlik die hele skool daar vergader is.

Dit lyk soos die aand toe Trelawney ontslaan is. Studente staan in 'n groot kring teen die mure (party van hulle, sien Harry, is vol Stinksap, of iets wat soos Stinksap lyk). Daar is ook onderwysers en spoke in die skare. Die Ondersoektaakmag staan heel voor en lyk hoogs in hul skik met hulself en Nurks hang in die lug bo almal se koppe. Almal staar na Fred en George. Hulle staan in die middel van die vertrek en lyk soos twee mense wat in 'n hoek gedryf is.

"So!" sê Umbridge triomfantlik en Harry besef sy staan net 'n paar trappies onderkant hom van waar sy op haar prooi kan neerkyk. "So – dan dink julle dis amusant om een van die skool se gange in 'n moeras te verander?"

"Baie amusant, ja," sê Fred en staar vreesloos na haar.

Fillis stamp 'n pad met sy elmboë oop tot langs Umbridge. Hy huil amper van vreugde.

"Ek het die vorm, mevrou," sê hy skor en waai die stuk perkament wat Harry hom so pas uit die lessenaarlaai sien haal het. "Ek het die vorm en die swepe staan reg. . . . O, ek kan nie wag om te begin nie."

"Dis mooi, Argus," sê sy. "Julle twee," gaan sy voort en staar af na Fred en George, "gaan binnekort leer wat met oortreders in my skool gebeur!"

"Weet jy wat?" sê Fred. "Ek dink nie ons gaan nie." Hy kyk na sy broer. "George, ek dink ons het voltydse skoling ontgroei."

"Ja, ek stem saam," sê George opgewek.

"Dis tyd om ons talente in die buitewêreld te beproef," sê Fred.

"Definitief," sê George.

En voor Umbridge 'n woord kan uitkry, lig hulle hul towerstawe en sê gelyk:

"Accio besems!"

Harry hoor 'n harde slag iewers in die verte. Hy kyk na links en koes net betyds. Fred en George se besemstokke skiet in die gang af op pad na hul eenaars. Die een sleep nog die swaar ketting en ysterpen waarmee Umbridge die besems aan die muur vasgemaak het. Hulle swenk na links, vlieg af met die trappe en kom steierend voor die tweeling tot stilstand. Die ketting klater op die keisteenvloer.

"Ons sal jou nie weer sien nie," sê Fred vir professor Umbridge en swaai sy heen oor sy besem.

“Ja, moenie moeite doen om kontak te behou nie,” sê George toe hy ook opklim.

Fred kyk na die studente wat doodstil om hulle staan.

“As iemand in ’n Draagbare Moeras belangstel soos hierbo gedemonstreer,” sê hy hard, “kom na Diagonaalstraat 39 – Weasley se Wonderpoetse. Ons nuwe perseel!”

“Spesiale afslag aan Hogwarts-studente wat belowe dat hulle ons produkte gaan gebruik om van hierdie ou koei ontslae te raak,” voeg George by en wys na professor Umbridge.

“KEER HULLE!” skree Umbridge, maar dis te laat. Die Onderzoektaakmag storm nader net toe Fred en George wegskop en drie meter die lug inskiet. Fred staar na die poltergeist wat op dieselfde hoogte as hy bo die studente se koppe sweef.

“Gee haar hel, Nurks.”

En Nurks, wat na Harry se wete nog nooit na ’n student geluister het nie, swiep sy klokhoed van sy kop en salueer net toe Fred en George onder dawerende toejuiging omswaai en deur die oop voordeure die sonsondergang tegemoet vlieg.

CHAPTER THIRTY



GRAWP

The story of Fred and George's flight to freedom was retold so often over the next few days that Harry could tell it would soon become the stuff of Hogwarts legend. Within a week, even those who had been eyewitnesses were half-convinced that they had seen the twins dive-bomb Umbridge on their brooms, pelting her with Dungbombs before zooming out of the doors. In the immediate aftermath of their departure there was a great wave of talk about copying them, so that Harry frequently heard students saying things like, "Honestly, some days I just feel like jumping on my broom and leaving this place," or else, "One more lesson like that and I might just do a Weasley . . ."

Fred and George had made sure that nobody was likely to forget them very soon. For one thing, they had not left instructions on how to remove the swamp that now filled the corridor on the fifth floor of

the east wing. Umbridge and Filch had been observed trying different means of removing it but without success. Eventually the area was roped off and Filch, gnashing his teeth furiously, was given the task of punting students across it to their classrooms. Harry was certain that teachers like McGonagall or Flitwick could have removed the swamp in an instant, but just as in the case of Fred and George's Wildfire Whiz-Bangs, they seemed to prefer to watch Umbridge struggle.

Then there were the two large broom-shaped holes in Umbridge's office door, through which Fred and George's Cleansweeps had smashed to rejoin their masters. Filch fitted a new door and removed Harry's Firebolt to the dungeons where, it was rumored, Umbridge had set an armed security troll to guard it. However, her troubles were far from over.

Inspired by Fred and George's example, a great number of students were now vying for the newly vacant positions of Troublemakers-in-Chief. In spite of the new door, somebody managed to slip a hairy-snouted niffler into Umbridge's office, which promptly tore the place apart in its search for shiny objects, leapt on Umbridge on her reentrance, and tried to gnaw the rings off her stubby fingers. Dungbombs and Stinkpellets were dropped so frequently in the corridors that it became the new fashion for students to perform Bubble-Head Charms on themselves before leaving lessons, which ensured them a supply of fresh clean air, even though it gave them all the peculiar appearance of wearing upside-down goldfish bowls on their heads.

Filch prowled the corridors with a horsewhip ready in his hands,

desperate to catch miscreants, but the problem was that there were now so many of them that he did not know which way to turn. The Inquisitorial Squad were attempting to help him, but odd things kept happening to its members. Warrington of the Slytherin Quidditch team reported to the hospital wing with a horrible skin complaint that made him look as though he had been coated in cornflakes. Pansy Parkinson, to Hermione's delight, missed all her lessons the following day, as she had sprouted antlers.

Meanwhile it became clear just how many Skiving Snackboxes Fred and George had managed to sell before leaving Hogwarts. Umbridge only had to enter her classroom for the students assembled there to faint, vomit, develop dangerous fevers, or else spout blood from both nostrils. Shrieking with rage and frustration she attempted to trace the mysterious symptoms to their source, but the students told her stubbornly they were suffering "Umbridge-itis." After putting four successive classes in detention and failing to discover their secret she was forced to give up and allow the bleeding, swooning, sweating, and vomiting students to leave her classes in droves.

But not even the users of the Snackboxes could compete with that master of chaos, Peeves, who seemed to have taken Fred's parting words deeply to heart. Cackling madly, he soared through the school, upending tables, bursting out of blackboards, and toppling statues and vases. Twice he shut Mrs. Norris inside suits of armor, from which she was rescued, yowling loudly, by the furious caretaker. He smashed lanterns and snuffed out candles, juggled burning torches over the heads of screaming students, caused neatly stacked piles of parchment to topple into fires or out of windows, flooded the second

floor when he pulled off all the taps in the bathrooms, dropped a bag of tarantulas in the middle of the Great Hall during breakfast and, whenever he fancied a break, spent hours at a time floating along after Umbridge and blowing loud raspberries every time she spoke.

None of the staff but Filch seemed to be stirring themselves to help her. Indeed, a week after Fred and George's departure Harry witnessed Professor McGonagall walking right past Peeves, who was determinedly loosening a crystal chandelier, and could have sworn he heard her tell the poltergeist out of the corner of her mouth, "It unscrews the other way."

To cap matters, Montague had still not recovered from his sojourn in the toilet. He remained confused and disorientated and his parents were to be observed one Tuesday morning striding up the front drive, looking extremely angry.

"Should we say something?" said Hermione in a worried voice, pressing her cheek against the Charms window so that she could see Mr. and Mrs. Montague marching inside. "About what happened to him? In case it helps Madam Pomfrey cure him?"

"Course not, he'll recover," said Ron indifferently.

"Anyway, more trouble for Umbridge, isn't it?" said Harry in a satisfied voice.

He and Ron both tapped the teacups they were supposed to be charming with their wands. Harry's spouted four very short legs that would not reach the desk and wriggled pointlessly in midair. Ron's grew four very thin spindly legs that hoisted the cup off the desk with great difficulty, trembled for a few seconds, then folded, causing the cup to crack into two.

“*Reparo!*” said Hermione quickly, mending Ron’s cup with a wave of her wand. “That’s all very well, but what if Montague’s permanently injured?”

“Who cares?” said Ron irritably, while his teacup stood drunkenly again, trembling violently at the knees. “Montague shouldn’t have tried to take all those points from Gryffindor, should he? If you want to worry about anyone, Hermione, worry about me!”

“You?” she said, catching her teacup as it scampered happily away across the desk on four sturdy little willow-patterned legs and replacing it in front of her. “Why should I be worried about you?”

“When Mum’s next letter finally gets through Umbridge’s screening process,” said Ron bitterly, now holding his cup up while its frail legs tried feebly to support its weight, “I’m going to be in deep trouble. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s sent a Howler again.”

“But —”

“It’ll be my fault Fred and George left, you wait,” said Ron darkly. “She’ll say I should’ve stopped them leaving, I should’ve grabbed the ends of their brooms and hung on or something. . . . Yeah, it’ll be all my fault . . .”

“Well, if she *does* say that it’ll be very unfair, you couldn’t have done anything! But I’m sure she won’t, I mean, if it’s really true they’ve got premises in Diagon Alley now, they must have been planning this for ages . . .”

“Yeah, but that’s another thing, how did they get premises?” said Ron, hitting his teacup so hard with his wand that its legs collapsed again and it lay twitching before him. “It’s a bit dodgy, isn’t it? They’ll need loads of Galleons to afford the rent on a place in

Diagon Alley, she'll want to know what they've been up to, to get their hands on that sort of gold . . .”

“Well, yes, that occurred to me too,” said Hermione, allowing her teacup to jog in neat little circles around Harry's, whose stubby little legs were still unable to touch the desktop. “I've been wondering whether Mundungus has persuaded them to sell stolen goods or something awful . . .”

“He hasn't,” said Harry curtly.

“How do you know?” said Ron and Hermione together.

“Because —” Harry hesitated, but the moment to confess finally seemed to have come. There was no good to be gained in keeping silent if it meant anyone suspected that Fred and George were criminals. “Because they got the gold from me. I gave them my Triwizard winnings last June.”

There was a shocked silence, then Hermione's teacup jogged right over the edge of the desk and smashed on the floor.

“Oh, Harry, you *didn't*!” she said.

“Yes, I did,” said Harry mutinously. “And I don't regret it either — I didn't need the gold, and they'll be great at a joke shop . . .”

“But this is excellent!” said Ron, looking thrilled. “It's all your fault, Harry — Mum can't blame me at all! Can I tell her?”

“Yeah, I suppose you'd better,” said Harry dully. “Specially if she thinks they're receiving stolen cauldrons or something . . .”

Hermione said nothing at all for the rest of the lesson, but Harry had a shrewd suspicion that her self-restraint was bound to crack before long. Sure enough, once they had left the castle for break and were standing around in the weak May sunshine, she fixed Harry with

a beady eye and opened her mouth with a determined air.

Harry interrupted her before she had even started.

“It’s no good nagging me, it’s done,” he said firmly. “Fred and George have got the gold — spent a good bit of it too, by the sounds of it — and I can’t get it back from them and I don’t want to. So save your breath, Hermione.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything about Fred and George!” she said in an injured voice.

Ron snorted disbelievingly and Hermione threw him a very dirty look.

“No, I wasn’t!” she said angrily. “As a matter of fact, I was going to ask Harry when he’s going to go back to Snape and ask for Occlumency lessons again!”

Harry’s heart sank. Once they had exhausted the subject of Fred and George’s dramatic departure, which admittedly had taken many hours, Ron and Hermione had wanted to hear news of Sirius. As Harry had not confided in them the reason he had wanted to talk to Sirius in the first place, it had been hard to think of things to tell them. He had ended up saying to them truthfully that Sirius wanted Harry to resume Occlumency lessons. He had been regretting this ever since; Hermione would not let the subject drop and kept reverting to it when Harry least expected it.

“You can’t tell me you’ve stopped having funny dreams,” Hermione said now, “because Ron told me last night you were muttering in your sleep again . . .”

Harry threw Ron a furious look. Ron had the grace to look ashamed of himself.

“You were only muttering a bit,” he mumbled apologetically. “Something about ‘just a bit farther.’”

“I dreamed I was watching you lot play Quidditch,” Harry lied brutally. “I was trying to get you to stretch out a bit farther to grab the Quaffle.”

Ron’s ears went red. Harry felt a kind of vindictive pleasure. He had not, of course, dreamed anything of the sort.

Last night he had once again made the journey along the Department of Mysteries corridor. He had passed through the circular room, then the room full of clicking and dancing light, until he found himself again inside that cavernous room full of shelves on which were ranged dusty glass spheres. . . .

He had hurried straight toward row number ninety-seven, turned left, and ran along it. . . . It had probably been then that he had spoken aloud. . . . *Just a bit farther* . . . for he could feel his conscious self struggling to wake . . . and before he had reached the end of the row, he had found himself lying in bed again, gazing up at the canopy of his four-poster.

“You are *trying* to block your mind, aren’t you?” said Hermione, looking beadily at Harry. “You are keeping going with your Occlumency?”

“Of course I am,” said Harry, trying to sound as though this question was insulting, but not quite meeting her eye. The truth was that he was so intensely curious about what was hidden in that room full of dusty orbs that he was quite keen for the dreams to continue.

The problem was that with just under a month to go until the exams and every free moment devoted to studying, his mind seemed

saturated with information when he went to bed so that he found it very difficult to get to sleep at all. When he did, his overwrought brain presented him most nights with stupid dreams about the exams. He also suspected that part of his mind — the part that often spoke in Hermione's voice — now felt guilty on the occasions it strayed down that corridor ending in the black door, and sought to wake him before he could reach journey's end.

"You know," said Ron, whose ears were still flaming red, "if Montague doesn't recover before Slytherin play Hufflepuff, we might be in with a chance of winning the Cup."

"Yeah, I s'pose so," said Harry, glad of a change of subject.

"I mean, we've won one, lost one — if Slytherin lose to Hufflepuff next Saturday —"

"Yeah, that's right," said Harry, losing track of what he was agreeing to: Cho Chang had just walked across the courtyard, determinedly not looking at him.

The final match of the Quidditch season, Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw, was to take place on the last weekend of May. Although Slytherin had been narrowly defeated by Hufflepuff in their last match, Gryffindor was not daring to hope for victory, due mainly (though of course nobody said it to him) to Ron's abysmal goalkeeping record. He, however, seemed to have found a new optimism.

"I mean, I can't get any worse, can I?" he told Harry and Hermione grimly over breakfast on the morning of the match. "Nothing to lose now, is there?"

“You know,” said Hermione, as she and Harry walked down to the pitch a little later in the midst of a very excitable crowd, “I think Ron might do better without Fred and George around. They never exactly gave him a lot of confidence . . .”

Luna Lovegood overtook them with what appeared to be a live eagle perched on top of her head.

“Oh gosh, I forgot!” said Hermione, watching the eagle flapping its wings as Luna walked serenely past a group of cackling and pointing Slytherins. “Cho will be playing, won’t she?”

Harry, who had not forgotten this, merely grunted.

They found seats in the second to topmost row of the stands. It was a fine, clear day. Ron could not wish for better, and Harry found himself hoping against hope that Ron would not give the Slytherins cause for more rousing choruses of “Weasley Is Our King.”

Lee Jordan, who had been very dispirited since Fred and George had left, was commentating as usual. As the teams zoomed out onto the pitches he named the players with something less than his usual gusto.

“ . . . Bradley . . . Davies . . . Chang,” he said, and Harry felt his stomach perform, less of a back flip, more a feeble lurch as Cho walked out onto the pitch, her shiny black hair rippling in the slight breeze. He was not sure what he wanted to happen anymore, except that he could not stand any more rows. Even the sight of her chatting animatedly to Roger Davies as they prepared to mount their brooms caused him only a slight twinge of jealousy.

“And they’re off!” said Lee. “And Davies takes the Quaffle immediately, Ravenclaw Captain Davies with the Quaffle, he dodges

Johnson, he dodges Bell, he dodges Spinnet as well . . . He's going straight for goal! He's going to shoot — and — and —” Lee swore very loudly. “And he's scored.”

Harry and Hermione groaned with the rest of the Gryffindors. Predictably, horribly, the Slytherins on the other side of the stands began to sing:

*Weasley cannot save a thing,
He cannot block a single ring . . .*

“Harry,” said a hoarse voice in Harry's ear. “Hermione . . .”

Harry looked around and saw Hagrid's enormous bearded face sticking between the seats; apparently he had squeezed his way all along the row behind; for the first and second years he had just passed had a ruffled, flattened look about them. For some reason, Hagrid was bent double as though anxious not to be seen, though he was still at least four feet taller than everybody else.

“Listen,” he whispered, “can yeh come with me? Now? While ev'ryone's watchin' the match?”

“Er . . . can't it wait, Hagrid?” asked Harry. “Till the match is over?”

“No,” said Hagrid. “No, Harry, it's gotta be now . . . while ev'ryone's lookin' the other way. . . . Please?”

Hagrid's nose was gently dripping blood. His eyes were both blackened. Harry had not seen him this close up since his return to the school; he looked utterly woebegone.

“Course,” said Harry at once, “course we'll come . . .”

He and Hermione edged back along their row of seats, causing much grumbling among the students who had to stand up for them. The people in Hagrid's row were not complaining, merely attempting to make themselves as small as possible.

"I 'ppreciate this, you two, I really do," said Hagrid as they reached the stairs. He kept looking around nervously as they descended toward the lawn below. "I jus' hope she doesn' notice us goin' . . ."

"You mean Umbridge?" said Harry. "She won't, she's got her whole Inquisitorial Squad sitting with her, didn't you see? She must be expecting trouble at the match."

"Yeah, well, a bit o' trouble wouldn' hurt," said Hagrid, pausing to peer around the edge of the stands to make sure the stretch of lawn between there and his cabin was deserted. "Give us more time . . ."

"What is it, Hagrid?" said Hermione, looking up at him with a concerned expression on her face as they hurried across the lawn toward the edge of the forest.

"Yeh — yeh'll see in a mo'," said Hagrid, looking over his shoulder as a great roar rose from the stands behind them. "Hey — did someone jus' score?"

"It'll be Ravenclaw," said Harry heavily.

"Good . . . good . . ." said Hagrid distractedly. "Tha's good . . ."

They had to jog to keep up with him as he strode across the lawn, looking around with every other step. When they reached his cabin, Hermione turned automatically left toward the front door; Hagrid, however, walked straight past it into the shade of the trees on the outermost edge of the forest, where he picked up a crossbow that was

leaning against a tree. When he realized they were no longer with him, he turned.

“We’re goin’ in here,” he said, jerking his shaggy head behind him.

“Into the forest?” said Hermione, perplexed.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid. “C’mon now, quick, before we’re spotted!”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, then ducked into the cover of the trees behind Hagrid, who was already striding away from them into the green gloom, his crossbow over his arm. Harry and Hermione ran to catch up with him.

“Hagrid, why are you armed?” said Harry.

“Jus’ a precaution,” said Hagrid, shrugging his massive shoulders.

“You didn’t bring your crossbow the day you showed us the thestrals,” said Hermione timidly.

“Nah, well, we weren’ goin’ in so far then,” said Hagrid. “An’ anyway, tha’ was before Firenze left the forest, wasn’ it?”

“Why does Firenze leaving make a difference?” asked Hermione curiously.

“‘Cause the other centaurs are good an’ riled at me, tha’s why,” said Hagrid quietly, glancing around. “They used ter be — well, yeh couldn’ call ’em friendly — but we got on all righ’. Kept ’emselves to ’emselves, bu’ always turned up if I wanted a word. Not anymore . . .”

He sighed deeply.

“Firenze said that they’re angry because he went to work for Dumbledore?” Harry asked, tripping on a protruding root because he was busy watching Hagrid’s profile.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid heavily. “Well, angry doesn’ cover it. Ruddy

livid. If I hadn' stepped in, I reckon they'd've kicked Firenze ter death —”

“They attacked him?” said Hermione, sounding shocked.

“Yep,” said Hagrid gruffly, forcing his way through several low-hanging branches. “He had half the herd onto him —”

“And you stopped it?” said Harry, amazed and impressed. “By yourself?”

“‘Course I did, couldn't stand by an' watch 'em kill him, could I?” said Hagrid. “Lucky I was passin', really . . . an' I'd've thought Firenze mighta remembered tha' before he started sendin' me stupid warnin's!” he added hotly and unexpectedly.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, startled, but Hagrid, scowling, did not elaborate.

“Anyway,” he said, breathing a little more heavily than usual, “since then the other centaurs've bin livid with me an' the trouble is, they've got a lot of influence in the forest. . . . Cleverest creatures in here . . .”

“Is that why we're here, Hagrid?” asked Hermione. “The centaurs?”

“Ah no,” said Hagrid, shaking his head dismissively, “no, it's not them. . . . Well, o' course, they could complicate the problem, yeah. . . . But yeh'll see what I mean in a bit . . .”

On this incomprehensible note he fell silent and forged a little ahead, taking one stride for every three of theirs, so that they had great trouble keeping up with him.

The path was becoming increasingly overgrown and the trees grew so closely together as they walked farther and farther into the forest

that it was as dark as dusk. They were soon a long way past the clearing where Hagrid had shown them the thestrals, but Harry felt no sense of unease until Hagrid stepped unexpectedly off the path and began wending his way in and out of trees toward the dark heart of the forest.

“Hagrid?” said Harry, fighting his way through thickly knotted brambles over which Hagrid had stepped easily and remembering very vividly what had happened to him on the other occasions he had stepped off the forest path. “Where are we going?”

“Bit further,” said Hagrid over his shoulder. “C’mon, Harry. We need ter keep together now . . .”

It was a great struggle to keep up with Hagrid, what with branches and thickets of thorn through which Hagrid marched as easily as though they were cobwebs, but which snagged Harry and Hermione’s robes, frequently entangling them so severely that they had to stop for minutes at a time to free themselves. Harry’s arms and legs were soon covered in small cuts and scratches. They were so deep in the forest now that sometimes all Harry could see of Hagrid in the gloom was a massive dark shape ahead of him. Any sound seemed threatening in the muffled silence. The breaking of a twig echoed loudly and the tiniest rustle of movement, though it might have been made by an innocent sparrow, caused Harry to peer through the gloom for a culprit. It occurred to him that he had never managed to get this far into the forest without meeting some kind of creature — their absence struck him as rather ominous.

“Hagrid, would it be all right if we lit our wands?” said Hermione quietly.

“Er . . . all righ’,” Hagrid whispered back. “In fact . . .”

He stopped suddenly and turned around; Hermione walked right into him and was knocked over backward. Harry caught her just before she hit the forest floor.

“Maybe we bes’ jus’ stop fer a momen’, so I can . . . fill yeh in,” said Hagrid. “Before we ge’ there, like.”

“Good!” said Hermione, as Harry set her back on her feet. They both murmured “*Lumos!*” and their wand-tips ignited. Hagrid’s face swam through the gloom by the light of the two wavering beams and Harry saw that he looked nervous and sad again.

“Righ’,” said Hagrid. “Well . . . see . . . the thing is . . .”

He took a great breath.

“Well, there’s a good chance I’m goin’ ter be gettin’ the sack any day now,” he said.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, then back at him.

“But you’ve lasted this long —” Hermione said tentatively. “What makes you think —”

“Umbridge reckons it was me that put tha’ niffler in her office.”

“And was it?” said Harry, before he could stop himself.

“No, it ruddy well wasn’t!” said Hagrid indignantly. “On’y anythin’ ter do with magical creatures an’ she thinks it’s got somethin’ ter do with me. Yeh know she’s bin lookin’ fer a chance ter get rid of me ever since I got back. I don’ wan’ ter go, o’ course, but if it wasn’ fer . . . well . . . the special circumstances I’m abou’ ter explain to yeh, I’d leave righ’ now, before she’s go’ the chance ter do it in front o’ the whole school, like she did with Trelawney.”

Harry and Hermione both made noises of protest, but Hagrid

overrode them with a wave of one of his enormous hands.

“It’s not the end o’ the world, I’ll be able ter help Dumbledore once I’m outta here, I can be useful ter the Order. An’ you lot’ll have Grubbly-Plank, yeh’ll — yeh’ll get through yer exams fine . . .” His voice trembled and broke.

“Don’ worry abou’ me,” he said hastily, as Hermione made to pat his arm. He pulled his enormous spotted handkerchief from the pocket of his waistcoat and mopped his eyes with it. “Look, I wouldn’ be tellin’ yer this at all if I didn’ have ter. See, if I go . . . well, I can’ leave withou’ . . . withou’ tellin’ someone . . . because I’ll — I’ll need you two ter help me. An’ Ron, if he’s willin’.”

“Of course we’ll help you,” said Harry at once. “What do you want us to do?”

Hagrid gave a great sniff and patted Harry wordlessly on the shoulder with such force that Harry was knocked sideways into a tree.

“I knew yeh’d say yes,” said Hagrid into his handkerchief, “but I won’ . . . never . . . forget . . . Well . . . c’mon . . . jus’ a little bit further through here . . . Watch yerselves, now, there’s nettles . . .”

They walked on in silence for another fifteen minutes. Harry had opened his mouth to ask how much farther they had to go when Hagrid threw out his right arm to signal that they should stop.

“Really easy,” he said softly. “Very quiet, now . . .”

They crept forward and Harry saw that they were facing a large, smooth mound of earth nearly as tall as Hagrid that he thought, with a jolt of dread, was sure to be the lair of some enormous animal. Trees had been ripped up at the roots all around the mound, so that it stood

on a bare patch of ground surrounded by heaps of trunks and boughs that formed a kind of fence or barricade, behind which Harry, Hermione, and Hagrid now stood.

“Sleepin’,” breathed Hagrid.

Sure enough, Harry could hear a distant, rhythmic rumbling that sounded like a pair of enormous lungs at work. He glanced sideways at Hermione, who was gazing at the mound with her mouth slightly open. She looked utterly terrified.

“Hagrid,” she said in a whisper barely audible over the sound of the sleeping creature, “who is he?”

Harry found this an odd question. . . . “What is it?” was the one he had been planning on asking.

“Hagrid, you told us,” said Hermione, her wand now shaking in her hand, “you told us none of them wanted to come!”

Harry looked from her to Hagrid and then, as realization hit him, he looked back at the mound with a small gasp of horror.

The great mound of earth, on which he, Hermione, and Hagrid could easily have stood, was moving slowly up and down in time with the deep, grunting breathing. It was not a mound at all. It was the curved back of what was clearly . . .

“Well — no — he didn’ want ter come,” said Hagrid, sounding desperate. “But I had ter bring him, Hermione, I had ter!”

“But why?” asked Hermione, who sounded as though she wanted to cry. “Why — what — oh, *Hagrid!*”

“I knew if I jus’ got him back,” said Hagrid, sounding close to tears himself, “an’ — an’ taught him a few manners — I’d be able ter take him outside an’ show ev’ryone he’s harmless!”

“Harmless!” said Hermione shrilly, and Hagrid made frantic hushing noises with his hands as the enormous creature before them grunted loudly and shifted in its sleep. “He’s been hurting you all this time, hasn’t he? That’s why you’ve had all these injuries!”

“He don’ know his own strength!” said Hagrid earnestly. “An’ he’s gettin’ better, he’s not fightin’ so much anymore —”

“So this is why it took you two months to get home!” said Hermione distractedly. “Oh Hagrid, why did you bring him back if he didn’t want to come, wouldn’t he have been happier with his own people?”

“They were all bullyin’ him, Hermione, ’cause he’s so small!” said Hagrid.

“Small?” said Hermione. “*Small?*”

“Hermione, I couldn’ leave him,” said Hagrid, tears now trickling down his bruised face into his beard. “See — he’s my brother!”

Hermione simply stared at him, her mouth open.

“Hagrid, when you say ‘brother,’” said Harry slowly, “do you mean — ?”

“Well — half-brother,” amended Hagrid. “Turns out me mother took up with another giant when she left me dad, an’ she went an’ had Grawp here —”

“Grawp?” said Harry.

“Yeah . . . well, tha’s what it sounds like when he says his name,” said Hagrid anxiously. “He don’ speak a lot of English. . . . I’ve bin tryin’ ter teach him. . . . Anyway, she don’ seem ter have liked him much more’n she liked me. . . . See, with giantesses, what counts is producin’ good big kids, and he’s always been a bit on the runty side

fer a giant — on'y sixteen foot —”

“Oh yes, tiny!” said Hermione, with a kind of hysterical sarcasm. “Absolutely minuscule!”

“He was bein’ kicked around by all o’ them — I jus’ couldn’ leave him —”

“Did Madame Maxime want to bring him back?” asked Harry.

“She — well, she could see it was right importan’ ter me,” said Hagrid, twisting his enormous hands. “Bu’ — bu’ she got a bit tired of him after a while, I must admit . . . so we split up on the journey home. . . . She promised not ter tell anyone though. . . .”

“How on earth did you get him back without anyone noticing?” said Harry.

“Well, tha’s why it took so long, see,” said Hagrid. “Could on’y travel by nigh’ an’ through wild country an’ stuff. ’Course, he covers the ground pretty well when he wants ter, but he kep’ wantin’ ter go back . . .”

“Oh Hagrid, why on earth didn’t you let him!” said Hermione, flopping down onto a ripped-up tree and burying her face in her hands. “What do you think you’re going to do with a violent giant who doesn’t even want to be here!”

“Well, now — ‘violent’ — tha’s a bit harsh,” said Hagrid, still twisting his hands agitatedly. “I’ll admit he mighta taken a couple o’ swings at me when he’s bin in a bad mood, but he’s gettin’ better, loads better, settlin’ down well . . .”

“What are those ropes for, then?” Harry asked.

He had just noticed ropes thick as saplings stretching from around the trunks of the largest nearby trees toward the place where Grawp

lay curled on the ground with his back to them.

“You have to keep him tied up?” said Hermione faintly.

“Well . . . yeah . . .” said Hagrid, looking anxious. “See — it’s like I say — he doesn’ really know his strength —”

Harry understood now why there had been such a suspicious lack of any other living creature in this part of the forest.

“So what is it you want Harry and Ron and me to do?” Hermione asked apprehensively.

“Look after him,” said Hagrid croakily. “After I’m gone.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged miserable looks, Harry uncomfortably aware that he had already promised Hagrid that he would do whatever he asked.

“What — what does that involve, exactly?” Hermione inquired.

“Not food or anythin’!” said Hagrid eagerly. “He can get his own food, no problem. Birds an’ deer an’ stuff . . . No, it’s company he needs. If I jus’ knew someone was carryin’ on tryin’ ter help him a bit . . . teachin’ him, yeh know . . .”

Harry said nothing, but turned to look back at the gigantic form lying asleep on the ground in front of them. Grawp had his back to them. Unlike Hagrid, who simply looked like a very oversize human, Grawp looked strangely misshapen. What Harry had taken to be a vast mossy boulder to the left of the great earthen mound he now recognized as Grawp’s head. It was much larger in proportion to the body than a human head, almost perfectly round and covered with tightly curling, close-growing hair the color of bracken. The rim of a single large, fleshy ear was visible on top of the head, which seemed to sit, rather like Uncle Vernon’s, directly upon the shoulders with

little or no neck in between. The back, under what looked like a dirty brownish smock comprised of animal skins sewn roughly together, was very broad, and as Grawp slept, it seemed to strain a little at the rough seams of the skins. The legs were curled up under the body; Harry could see the soles of enormous, filthy, bare feet, large as sledges, resting one on top of the other on the earthy forest floor.

“You want us to teach him,” Harry said in a hollow voice. He now understood what Firenze’s warning had meant. *His attempt is not working. He would do better to abandon it.* Of course, the other creatures who lived in the forest would have heard Hagrid’s fruitless attempts to teach Grawp English. . . .

“Yeah — even if yeh jus’ talk ter him a bit,” said Hagrid hopefully. “Cause I reckon, if he can talk ter people, he’ll understand more that we all like him really, an’ want him to stay . . .”

Harry looked at Hermione, who peered back at him from between the fingers over her face.

“Kind of makes you wish we had Norbert back, doesn’t it?” he said and she gave a very shaky laugh.

“Yeh’ll do it, then?” said Hagrid, who did not seem to have caught what Harry had just said.

“We’ll . . .” said Harry, already bound by his promise. “We’ll try, Hagrid . . .”

“I knew I could count on yeh, Harry,” Hagrid said, beaming in a very watery way and dabbing at his face with his handkerchief again. “An’ I don’ wan’ yeh ter put yerself out too much, like. . . . I know yeh’ve got exams. . . . If yeh could jus’ nip down here in yer Invisibility Cloak maybe once a week an’ have a little chat with

him . . . I'll wake him up, then — introduce you —”

“Wha — no!” said Hermione, jumping up, “Hagrid, no, don't wake him, really, we don't need —”

But Hagrid had already stepped over the great trunk in front of them and was proceeding toward Grawp. When he was around ten feet away, he lifted a long, broken bough from the ground, smiled reassuringly over his shoulder at Harry and Hermione, and then poked Grawp hard in the middle of the back with the end of the bough.

The giant gave a roar that echoed around the silent forest. Birds in the treetops overhead rose twittering from their perches and soared away. In front of Harry and Hermione, meanwhile, the gigantic Grawp was rising from the ground, which shuddered as he placed an enormous hand upon it to push himself onto his knees and turned his head to see who and what had disturbed him.

“All righ', Grawpy?” said Hagrid in a would-be cheery voice, backing away with the long bough raised, ready to poke Grawp again. “Had a nice sleep, eh?”

Harry and Hermione retreated as far as they could while still keeping the giant within their sights. Grawp knelt between two trees he had not yet uprooted. They looked up into his startlingly huge face, which resembled a gray full moon swimming in the gloom of the clearing. It was as though the features had been hewn onto a great stone ball. The nose was stubby and shapeless, the mouth lopsided and full of misshapen yellow teeth the size of half-bricks. The small eyes were a muddy greenish-brown and just now were half gummed together with sleep. Grawp raised dirty knuckles as big as cricket

balls to his eyes, rubbed vigorously, then, without warning, pushed himself to his feet with surprising speed and agility.

“Oh my . . .” Harry heard Hermione squeal, terrified, beside him.

The trees to which the other ends of the ropes around Grawp’s wrists and ankles were attached creaked ominously. He was, as Hagrid had said, at least sixteen feet tall. Gazing blearily around, he reached out a hand the size of a beach umbrella, seized a bird’s nest from the upper branches of a towering pine and turned it upside down with a roar of apparent displeasure that there was no bird in it — eggs fell like grenades toward the ground and Hagrid threw his arms over his head to protect himself.

“Anyway, Grawpy,” shouted Hagrid, looking up apprehensively in case of further falling eggs, “I’ve brought some friends ter meet yeh. Remember, I told yeh I might? Remember, when I said I might have ter go on a little trip an’ leave them ter look after yeh fer a bit? Remember that, Grawpy?”

But Grawp merely gave another low roar; it was hard to say whether he was listening to Hagrid or whether he even recognized the sounds Hagrid was making as speech. He had now seized the top of the pine tree and was pulling it toward him, evidently for the simple pleasure of seeing how far it would spring back when he let go.

“Now, Grawpy, don’ do that!” shouted Hagrid. “Tha’s how you ended up pullin’ up the others —”

And sure enough, Harry could see the earth around the tree’s roots beginning to crack.

“I got company fer yeh!” Hagrid shouted. “Company, see! Look

down, yeh big buffoon, I brought yeh some friends!”

“Oh Hagrid, don’t,” moaned Hermione, but Hagrid had already raised the bough again and gave Grawp’s knee a sharp poke.

The giant let go of the top of the pine tree, which swayed menacingly and deluged Hagrid with a rain of needles, and looked down.

“*This*,” said Hagrid, hastening over to where Harry and Hermione stood, “is Harry, Grawp! Harry Potter! He migh’ be comin’ ter visit yeh if I have ter go away, understand?”

The giant had only just realized that Harry and Hermione were there. They watched, in great trepidation, as he lowered his huge boulder of a head so that he could peer blearily at them.

“An’ this is Hermione, see? Her —” Hagrid hesitated. Turning to Hermione he said, “Would yeh mind if he called yeh Hermy, Hermione? On’y it’s a difficult name fer him ter remember . . .”

“No, not at all,” squeaked Hermione.

“This is Hermy, Grawp! An’ she’s gonna be comin’ an’ all! Is’n tha’ nice? Eh? Two friends fer yeh ter — GRAWPY, NO!”

Grawp’s hand had shot out of nowhere toward Hermione — Harry seized her and pulled her backward behind the tree, so that Grawp’s fist scraped the trunk but closed on thin air.

“BAD BOY, GRAWPY!” Harry heard Hagrid yelling, as Hermione clung to Harry behind the tree, shaking and whimpering. “VERY BAD BOY! YEH DON’ GRAB — OUCH!”

Harry poked his head out from around the trunk and saw Hagrid lying on his back, his hand over his nose. Grawp, apparently losing interest, had straightened up again and was again engaged in pulling

back the pine as far as it would go.

“Righ’,” said Hagrid thickly, getting up with one hand pinching his bleeding nose and the other grasping his crossbow. “Well . . . there yeh are. . . . Yeh’ve met him an’ — an’ now he’ll know yeh when yeh come back. Yeah . . . well . . .”

He looked up at Grawp, who was now pulling back the pine with an expression of detached pleasure on his boulderish face; the roots were creaking as he ripped them away from the ground.

“Well, I reckon tha’s enough fer one day,” said Hagrid. “We’ll — er — we’ll go back now, shall we?”

Harry and Hermione nodded. Hagrid shouldered his crossbow again and, still pinching his nose, led the way back into the trees.

Nobody spoke for a while, not even when they heard the distant crash that meant Grawp had pulled over the pine tree at last. Hermione’s face was pale and set. Harry could not think of a single thing to say. What on earth was going to happen when somebody found out that Hagrid had hidden Grawp in the forest? And he had promised that he, Ron, and Hermione would continue Hagrid’s totally pointless attempts to civilize the giant. . . . How could Hagrid, even with his immense capacity to delude himself that fanged monsters were lovably harmless, fool himself that Grawp would ever be fit to mix with humans?

“Hold it,” said Hagrid abruptly, just as Harry and Hermione were struggling through a patch of thick knotgrass behind him. He pulled an arrow out of the quiver over his shoulder and fitted it into the crossbow. Harry and Hermione raised their wands; now that they had stopped walking, they too could hear movement close by.

“Oh blimey,” said Hagrid quietly.

“I thought that we told you, Hagrid,” said a deep male voice, “that you are no longer welcome here?”

A man’s naked torso seemed for an instant to be floating toward them through the dappled green half-light. Then they saw that his waist joined smoothly with a horse’s chestnut body. This centaur had a proud, high-cheekboned face and long black hair. Like Hagrid, he was armed: A quiverful of arrows and a long bow were slung over his shoulders.

“How are yeh, Magorian?” said Hagrid warily.

The trees behind the centaur rustled and four or five more emerged behind him. Harry recognized the black-bodied and bearded Bane, whom he had met nearly four years ago on the same night he had met Firenze. Bane gave no sign that he had ever seen Harry before.

“So,” he said, with a nasty inflection in his voice, before turning immediately to Magorian. “We agreed, I think, what we would do if this human showed his face in the forest again?”

““This human’ now, am I?” said Hagrid testily. “Jus’ fer stoppin’ all of yeh committin’ murder?”

“You ought not to have meddled, Hagrid,” said Magorian. “Our ways are not yours, nor are our laws. Firenze has betrayed and dishonored us.”

“I dunno how yeh work that out,” said Hagrid impatiently. “He’s done nothin’ except help Albus Dumbledore —”

“Firenze has entered into servitude to humans,” said a gray centaur with a hard, deeply lined face.

“*Servitude!*” said Hagrid scathingly. “He’s doin’ Dumbledore a

favor is all —”

“He is peddling our knowledge and secrets among humans,” said Magorian quietly. “There can be no return from such disgrace.”

“If yeh say so,” said Hagrid, shrugging, “but personally I think yeh’re makin’ a big mistake —”

“As are you, human,” said Bane, “coming back into our forest when we warned you —”

“Now, you listen ter me,” said Hagrid angrily. “I’ll have less of the ‘our’ forest, if it’s all the same ter you. It’s not up ter you who comes an’ goes in here —”

“No more is it up to you, Hagrid,” said Magorian smoothly. “I shall let you pass today because you are accompanied by your young —”

“They’re not his!” interrupted Bane contemptuously. “Students, Magorian, from up at the school! They have probably already profited from the traitor Firenze’s teachings . . .”

“Nevertheless,” said Magorian calmly, “the slaughter of foals is a terrible crime. . . . We do not touch the innocent. Today, Hagrid, you pass. Henceforth, stay away from this place. You forfeited the friendship of the centaurs when you helped the traitor Firenze escape us.”

“I won’ be kept outta the fores’ by a bunch of mules like you!” said Hagrid loudly.

“Hagrid,” said Hermione in a high-pitched and terrified voice, as both Bane and the gray centaur pawed at the ground, “let’s go, please let’s go!”

Hagrid moved forward, but his crossbow was still raised and his

eyes were still fixed threateningly upon Magorian.

“We know what you are keeping in the forest, Hagrid!” Magorian called after them, as the centaurs slipped out of sight. “And our tolerance is waning!”

Hagrid turned and gave every appearance of wanting to walk straight back to Magorian again.

“You’ll tolerate him as long as he’s here, it’s as much his forest as yours!” he yelled, while Harry and Hermione both pushed with all their might against Hagrid’s moleskin waistcoat in an effort to keep him moving forward. Still scowling, he looked down, his expression changed to mild surprise at the sight of them both pushing him. He seemed not to have felt it.

“Calm down, you two,” he said, turning to walk on while they panted along behind him. “Ruddy old nags though, eh?”

“Hagrid,” said Hermione breathlessly, skirting the patch of nettles they had passed on their way there, “if the centaurs don’t want humans in the forest, it doesn’t really look as though Harry and I will be able —”

“Ah, you heard what they said,” said Hagrid dismissively. “They wouldn’t hurt foals — I mean, kids. Anyway, we can’ let ourselves be pushed around by that lot . . .”

“Nice try,” Harry murmured to Hermione, who looked crestfallen.

At last they rejoined the path and after another ten minutes, the trees began to thin. They were able to see patches of clear blue sky again and hear, in the distance, the definite sounds of cheering and shouting.

“Was that another goal?” asked Hagrid, pausing in the shelter of

the trees as the Quidditch stadium came into view. "Or d'you reckon the match is over?"

"I don't know," said Hermione miserably. Harry saw that she looked much the worse for wear; her hair was full of bits of twig and leaves, her robes were ripped in several places and there were numerous scratches on her face and arms. He knew he could look little better.

"I reckon it's over, yeh know!" said Hagrid, still squinting toward the stadium. "Look — there's people comin' out already — if you two hurry yeh'll be able ter blend in with the crowd an' no one'll know you weren't there!"

"Good idea," said Harry. "Well . . . see you later, then, Hagrid . . ."

"I don't believe him," said Hermione in a very unsteady voice, the moment they were out of earshot of Hagrid. "I don't believe him. I *really* don't believe him. . ."

"Calm down," said Harry.

"Calm down!" she said feverishly. "A giant! A giant in the forest! And we're supposed to give him English lessons! Always assuming, of course, we can get past the herd of murderous centaurs on the way in and out! I — don't — *believe* — him!"

"We haven't got to do anything yet!" Harry tried to reassure her in a quiet voice, as they joined a stream of jabbering Hufflepuffs heading back toward the castle. "He's not asking us to do anything unless he gets chucked out and that might not even happen —"

"Oh come off it, Harry!" said Hermione angrily, stopping dead in her tracks so that the people behind her had to swerve to avoid her.

“Of course he’s going to be chucked out and to be perfectly honest, after what we’ve just seen, who can blame Umbridge?”

There was a pause in which Harry glared at her, and her eyes filled slowly with tears.

“You didn’t mean that,” said Harry quietly.

“No . . . well . . . all right . . . I didn’t,” she said, wiping her eyes angrily. “But why does he have to make life so difficult for himself — for *us*?”

“I dunno —”

*Weasley is our King,
Weasley is our King,
He didn't let the Quaffle in,
Weasley is our King . . .*

“And I wish they’d stop singing that stupid song,” said Hermione miserably, “haven’t they gloated enough?”

A great tide of students was moving up the sloping lawns from the pitch.

“Oh, let’s get in before we have to meet the Slytherins,” said Hermione.

*Weasley can save anything,
He never leaves a single ring,
That's why Gryffindors all sing:
Weasley is our King.*

“Hermione . . .” said Harry slowly.

The song was growing louder, but it was issuing not from a crowd of green-and-silver-clad Slytherins, but from a mass of red and gold moving slowly toward the castle, which was bearing a solitary figure upon its many shoulders. . . .

*Weasley is our King,
Weasley is our King,
He didn't let the Quaffle in,
Weasley is our King . . .*

"No!" said Hermione in a hushed voice.

"YES!" said Harry loudly.

"HARRY! HERMIONE!" yelled Ron, waving the silver Quidditch Cup in the air and looking quite beside himself. "WE DID IT! WE WON!"

They beamed up at him as he passed; there was a scrum at the door of the castle and Ron's head got rather badly bumped on the lintel, but nobody seemed to want to put him down. Still singing, the crowd squeezed itself into the entrance hall and out of sight. Harry and Hermione watched them go, beaming, until the last echoing strains of "Weasley Is Our King" died away. Then they turned to each other, their smiles fading.

"We'll save our news till tomorrow, shall we?" said Harry.

"Yes, all right," said Hermione wearily. "I'm not in any hurry . . ."

They climbed the steps together. At the front doors both instinctively looked back at the Forbidden Forest. Harry was not sure whether it was his imagination or not, but he rather thought he saw a

small cloud of birds erupting into the air over the treetops in the distance, almost as though the tree in which they had been nesting had just been pulled up by the roots.

Ghrop

Die verhaal van Fred en George se ontsnapping word in die loop van die volgende paar dae soveel keer oorvertel dat Harry kan sien dit gaan 'n Hogwarts-legende word. Binne 'n week is selfs die ooggetuies oortuig hulle het gesien hoe die tweeling met hul besems op Umbridge afduik en haar met Misbomme bestook voor hulle by die deure uitgeswiep het. Daar is selfs mense wat dreig om hulle dit na te doen. Harry hoor studente goed sê soos: “Ek’s sommer lus en spring op my besem en vlieg hier uit,” of: “Nog een klas soos hierdie en ek doen 'n Weasley.”

Fred en George het seker gemaak dat niemand hulle gou gaan vergeet nie. Hulle het geen instruksies gelaat vir die verwydering van die moeras nie, en dit bedek nou die hele gang in die oostelike vleuel op die vyfde verdieping. Umbridge en Fillis het alles probeer om daarvan ontslae te raak, sonder enige sukses. Dis later met toue afgesper en 'n tandeknersende Fillis is genoodsaak om die mense wat daar klas loop met 'n pont oor te neem. Harry is seker dat onderwysers soos McGonagall of Flickerpitt dit blitsig sal kan wegtuur, maar net soos met Fred en George se vuurwerke verkies hulle om Umbridge te laat sweet.

Daar was ook twee groot besemvormige gate in Umbridge se kantoor deur waardeur Fred en George se Wegveeg-besems gebars het. Fillis het 'n nuwe deur ingesit en Harry se Vuurslag na die kerkers geneem, waar Umbridge na bewering 'n gewapende sekerheidstrol aangestel het om dit op te pas. Maar haar probleme is nog lank nie verby nie.

'n Hele klomp studente wedywer vir Fred en George se posisie as hoofopstokers. Ten spyte van die nuwe deur het iemand dit reggekry om 'n harigesnoet-niffler in Umbridge se kantoor in te smokkel. Die niffler het die kantoor verwoes op soek na blink voorwerpe, Umbridge bespring toe sy ingekom het en probeer om haar ringe van haar stomp vingers af te byt. Misbomme en Sunkpille word so

gereeld in die gange gegooi dat studente Borrellkopspreuke op hulself toepas voor hulle die klaskamers verlaat. Hoewel hulle op hierdie manier verseker is van vars lug, lyk dit of almal omgedopte goudvisbakke op hul koppe dra.

Fillis sluip sweep in die hand deur die gange op soek na oortreders, maar daar is nou so baie dat hy nie weet wie om te vat en wie om te los nie. Die Ondersoektaakmag probeer hom help, maar vreemde dinge gebeur gereeld met die lede. Warrington van die Slibberin-Kwiddiekspan meld by die siekeboeg aan met 'n nare uitslag wat lyk of hy in graankos gerol het. Tot Hermien se vreugde mis Pansy Parkinson die volgende dag al haar klasse omdat daar takbokhorings op haar kop gegroei het.

Dit raak mettertyd ook duidelik hoeveel Stokkiesdraaisnoepies Fred en George verkoop het voor hulle Hogwarts verlaat het. Umbridge hoef net by die klaskamer in te stap vir studente om te begin flou val, op te gooi, 'n hoe koors te ontwikkel of deur albei neusgate te bloei. Sy gil van woede, maar kan nie die oorsaak van die geheimsinnige simptome opspoor nie, terwyl die studente volhou dat hulle aan "Umbridge-itis" ly. Nadat sy vier klasse ná mekaar sonder om hulle geheim uit te vind, detensie gegee het, gee sy die stryd gewonne en laat die hordes bloeiende, flou vallende, swetende en brakende studente toe om die klas te verlaat.

Maar nie eens die Snoepies kan kompeteer met Nurks, die meester van chaos, nie. Dit lyk of hy Fred en George se afskeidswoorde behoortlik ter harte geneem het. Hy swiep kekkelend deur die skool, gooi tafels om, bars deur skryfborde, keer standbeelde en vase om en maak 'n miaauende mevrou Norris twee keer in 'n wapenrusting toe sodat 'n gillende Fillis haar moet red. Fillis slaan lanterns stukkend en snuit kerse, gooi brandende fakkels oor skreeuende studente se koppe, laat netjies gepakte stapels perkament in vure of deur vensters val, veroorsaak 'n vloed op die tweede verdieping toe hy al die krane in die badkamers oopdraai, en laat val 'n sak tarantulas tydens ontbyt in die middel van die Groot Saal. Wanneer hy 'n blaaskans soek, sweef hy agter Umbridge aan en koggel haar elke keer dat sy iets sê.

Fillis is die enigste personeellid wat 'n vinger lig om Umbridge te help. 'n Week ná Fred en George se vertrek sien Harry hoe professor McGonagall verby Nurks stap wat besig is om 'n kristalkandelaar los te skroef, en hy kan sweer hy't haar uit die hoek van haar mond hoor sê: "Dit draai anderkant toe los."

Om alles te kroon, het Montague nog nie van sy verblyf in die toilet herstel nie. Hy is nog steeds verward en deurmekaar en toe sy

ouers een Dinsdagoggend by die kasteel aankom, lyk hulle bitter ontsteld.

"Sal ons iets sê?" vra Hermien bekommerd. Sy druk haar wang teen die venster in die Towerspreuk-klaskamer sodat sy kan sien as meneer en mevrou Montague instap. "Oor wat met hom gebeur het? Ingeval dit vir Madame Pomfrey kan help om hom gesond te maak?"

"Natuurlik nie, hy sal wel regkom," sê Ron onverskillig.

"In elk geval, dis meer moeilikheid vir Umbridge," sê Harry tevrede.

Hy en Ron tik die teekoppies wat hulle moet toor met hul towerstawe. Vier kort beentjies wat nie aan die tafel kan raak nie, maar in die lug bly krabbel, groei uit Harry's n. Ron's n het vier baie dun beentjies wat die koppie 'n oomblik bewend oplig voor hulle ingee sodat die koppie val en breek.

"*Reparo*," sê Hermien vinnig en maak Ron se koppie met haar towerstaf reg. "Dis alles goed en wel, maar wat as Montague permanente skade het?"

"Wat daarvan?" sê Ron ergerlik terwyl sy koppie dronkerig en met bewende knieë opstaan. "Montague moes nie al daardie punte van Griffindor afgetrek het nie. As jy jou oor iemand wil bekommer, Hermien, wat van my?"

"Jy?" Sy vang haar koppie, wat op vier stewige beentjies versier met 'n wilgerpatroon oor die lessenaar wegskarrel, en sit dit voor haar neer. "Hoekom sal ek my oor jou bekommer?"

"Want ek gaan diep in die sop wees as Ma se volgende brief eendag deur Umbridge se siftingsproses is," sê Ron bitter terwyl hy sy koppie vashou om die vier kierebeentjies te help. "Dit sal my nie verbaas as sy 'n Skeller stuur nie."

"Maar –"

"Dit sal my skuld wees dat Fred en George weg is, jy sal sien. Sy sal sê ek moes hulle gekeer het. Ek moes hulle besems aan die stiele gegryp en daaraan gehang het, of so iets . . . Ek sê jou, dit sal alles my skuld wees."

"Wel, as sy dit sê, sal dit baie onregverdig wees. Daar was niks wat jy kon doen nie! Maar ek is seker sy sal nie, ek bedoel, as dit regtig waar is dat hulle 'n perseel in Diagonaalstraat het, beplan hulle dit al lank."

"Ja, maar dis nog iets. Waar kom hulle aan die kastige perseel?" Ron raps sy koppie so hard met sy towerstaf dat die beentjies padgee en die koppie sidderend voor hom bly lê. "Dit klink 'n bietjie snaaks, hè? Hulle sal tonne Galjoene moet hê om 'n plek in

Diagonaalstraat te kan huur. Sy sal wil weet waar hulle daaraan kom. Hoe hulle soveel goud in die hande gekry het."

"Wel, ja, ek het ook daaraan gedink," sê Hermien. Sy laat haar teekoppie in sirkels om Harry s'n dans, wat nog steeds sukkel om syne se kort beentjies langer te kry. "Ek wonder of Mundungus hulle oorreed het om gesteelde goed te verkoop."

"Hy het nie," sê Harry kortaf.

"Hoe weet jy?" vra Ron en Hermien gelyk.

"Omdat – " Harry aarsel, maar hy besef dis die oomblik van waarheid. Dit sal nie deug om stil te bly as Fred en George van misdaad verdink word nie. "Omdat hulle die goud by my gekry het. Ek het my Drietowenaarsprysgeld verlede Junie vir hulle gegee."

Daar is 'n geskokte stilte. Hermien se koppie draf oor die kant van die lessenaar en breek op die vloer.

"O, Harry, jy het nie!" sê sy.

"Ja, ek het," sê Harry rebels. "En ek is glad nie spyt daaroor nie. Ek het nie die goud nodig gehad nie en hul grapwinkel sal wonderlik wees."

"Maar dis fantasties!" sê Ron in sy skik. "Dis dan alles jou skuld, Harry – Ma kan my nie meer blameer nie! Kan ek maar vir haar sê?"

"Ja, jy kan seker," sê Harry stroef. "Veral as sy gaan dink hulle verkoop gesteelde heksetels of iets."

Hermien sê die res van die periode niks, maar Harry vermoed dat haar selfbeheersing nie lank gaan hou nie. Hulle is ook skaars vir pouse buite in die flou Mei-sonnetjie toe sy stip na Harry kyk en haar mond met 'n besliste uitdrukking oopmaak.

Harry val haar in die rede voor sy kan begin.

"Dit gaan nie help om om my ore te kerm nie," sê hy ferm. "Fred en George het klaar die goud – en dit klink of hulle sommer al baie daarvan uitgegee het – en ek kan dit nie terugvat nie en ek wil ook nie. Hou dus jou mond, Hermien."

"Ek was nie van plan om iets oor Fred en George te sê nie!" sê sy gekrenk.

Ron snork ongelowig en Hermien gee hom 'n vuil kyk.

"Ek was nie!" sê sy vies. "Ek wou vir Harry vra wanneer hy vir Snerp gaan vra om weer vir hom Okklumensie-lesse te gee."

Harry se hart sink. Toe die onderwerp van Fred en George se dramatiese vertrek uiteindelik holrug gery was, wou Ron en Hermien weet hoe dit met Sirius gaan. Aangesien Harry nie vir hulle gesê het hoekom hy vir Sirius wou sien nie, moes hy aan iets dink om vir hulle te vertel. Op die ou end het hy erken dat Sirius wil hê hy moet weer Okklumensie-lesse neem, maar hy't dit dadelik be-

rou. Hermien het daaraan vasgebyt soos 'n bulhond en daarna verwys wanneer hy dit die minste verwag.

"Moenie vir my sê jy het nie meer snaakse drome nie," sê Hermien, "want Ron het my vertel dat jy weer laas nag in jou slaap gepraat het."

Harry kyk woedend na Ron, wat die grasiale om skaam te lyk.

"Jy't maar min gesê," mompel hy verskonend. "Iets soos 'nog net 'n entjie'."

"Ek het gedroom ek kyk hoe julle Kwiddiek speel," lieg Harry. "Ek wou hê jy moet nog net 'n entjie strek om die Swelger by te kom." Ron se ore word rooi, maar Harry kry lekker.

Dis natuurlik nie wat hy gedroom het nie, hy was die vorige nag weer in die gang in die Departement vir Geheime. Hy het deur die ronde vertrek gestap na die vertrek met die dansende ligte en die vreemde geklik tot in die reusagtige kamer vol rakke waarop die stowwerige glasballe staan.

Hy het met die rakke langs geloop tot hy by ry sewe-en-negentig gekom het, links gedraai en vinnig daarlangs gestap. Dis waarskynlik toe dat hy hardop gepraat het. . . . *nog net 'n entjie* . . . want hy kon voel hoe sy bewussyn sukkel om hom wakker te maak en voor hy aan die onderpunt van die ry kon kom, was hy weer in sy hemelbed onder die baldakyn.

"Jy oefen nog om jou gedagtes skoon te maak, of hoe?" sê Hermien en kyk met kraaloë na Harry. "Jy gaan voort met jou Okklumensie?"

"Natuurlik," sê Harry, wat probeer klink asof hy beledig is, maar hy kan haar nie in die oë kyk nie. Eintlik is hy so nuuskierig oor wat in daardie vertrek vol stowwerige glasballe versteek is dat hy nie wil hê die drome moet ophou nie.

Die ander probleem is dat dit net minder as 'n maand voor die eksamen is en dat elke oomblik aan hersiening gewy word. Sy kop is so vol inligting dat dit moeilik is om aan die slaap te raak, en wanneer hy wel indommel, droom hy simpel goed oor die eksamen. Hy vermoed ook dat 'n gedeelte van sy brein – dié gedeelte wat baie keer met Hermien se stem praat – skuldig voel wanneer hy deur daardie gang na die swart deur stap en hom probeer wakker maak voor hy aan die einde van die reis kom.

"Weet jy," sê Ron, wie se ore nog steeds vuurrooi is, "as Montague nie regkom voor Slibberin teen Hoesenproes speel nie, het ons dalk 'n kans om die beker te wen."

"Ja, seker," sê Harry, verlig dat die onderwerp verander is.

"Ek bedoel, ons het een gewen, een verloor, en as Slibberin volgende Saterdag teen Hoesenproes verloor –"

“Ja, dis reg,” sê Harry, wat nie meer luister nie. Cho Chang het pas deur die binnehof gestap, vasberade om nie na sy kant te kyk nie.

Die laaste wedstryd vir die Kwiddiekseisoen, Griffindor versus Raweklou, is geskeduleer vir die laaste naweek in Mei. Hoewel Slibberin naelskraap deur Hoesenproes verslaan is, kan Griffindor nie staatmaak op 'n oorwinning nie, hoofsaaklik weens Ron se treurige doelwagterwerk – maar dit sê niemand natuurlik vir hom nie.

Dit lyk egter, of Ron nuwe moed geskep het. “Ek bedoel, ek kan nie slegter word nie, kan ek?” sê hy die oggend voor die wedstryd vir Harry en Hermien. “Ek het niks om te verloor nie.”

“Weet jy,” sê Hermien toe sy en Harry 'n rukkie later saam met die opgewonde skare na die stadion stap, “ek dink Ron sal dalk beter vaar sonder Fred en George. Hulle was nie juis goed vir sy selfvertroue nie.”

Mania Goedlief kom verby hulle met iets op haar kop wat lyk soos 'n lewende arend.

“Hei, ek het vergeet!” Hermien kyk hoe die arend sy vlerke klap terwyl Mania doodrustig verby 'n groep giggelende Slibberins stap. “Cho speel mos, nè?”

Harry, wat nie vergeet het nie, snork bloot.

Hulle gaan sit in die boonste ry op die pawiljoen. Dis 'n mooi, helder dag. Ron kon nie beter weer bestel het nie en Harry hou duim vas dat hy nie weer die Slibberins rede gaan gee om “Weasley is ons Koning” te sing nie.

Lee Jordaan, wat baie stil is ná Fred en George se vertrek, lewer soos gewoonlik kommentaar. Toe die spelers uit die kleedkamers kom, sê hy hulle name met heelwat minder entoesiasme as gewoonlik.

“... Bradley . . . Davies . . . Chang . . .” Harry voel hoe sy maag nie eintlik 'n draai maak nie, dis meer 'n effense ruk wat hy voel toe Cho op die veld stap. Haar blinkswart hare golf in die windjie. Harry is nie seker wat hy wil hê tussen hulle moet gebeur nie, maar hy is moeg vir die ewige gestry. Selfs toe sy vrolik met Roger Davies gesels voor hulle op hul besems klim, voel hy amper nie eens jaloers nie.

“En hulle is weg!” sê Lee. “En Davies het onmiddellik besit van die Swelger, Raweklou se kaptein, Davies het die Swelger. Hy ontwyk vir Johnson, vir Bell, vir Spinnet . . . hy pyl reg op die doelpale af! Hy gaan skiet – en – en –” Lee vloek hard. “En dis in.”

Harry en Hermien kreun saam met die res van die Griffindors, terwyl die Slibberins aan die oorkant van die pawiljoen begin sing:

"Weasley kan net kring en kring,
Hy hou geen Swelger uit die ring."

"Harry," sê 'n skor stem in Harry se oor. "Hermien . . ."

Harry kyk om en sien Hagrid se tamaai bebaarde gesig tussen die sitplekke. Hy moet 'n pad deur die ry agter hulle gedruk het, want die eerste- en tweedejaars wat daar sit, lyk platgedruk. Dit lyk of Hagrid vooroor buig asof hy nie gesien wil word nie, hoewel hy nog steeds meer as 'n meter bo al die ander mense uittoon.

"Hoor hier," fluister hy, "kan julle saam met my kom? Nou. Terwyl almal na die wedstryd kyk?"

"Hm . . . kan dit nie wag nie, Hagrid?" vra Harry. "Net tot die wedstryd verby is?"

"Nee," sê Hagrid. "Nee, Harry, nou . . . terwyl almal besig is . . . asseblief?"

Daar drup bloed uit Hagrid se neus en albei sy oë is blou. Harry het hom nog nie weer van naby gesien sedert hy teruggekom het nie, maar hy lyk sleg.

"Natuurlik," sê Harry dadelik. "Natuurlik sal ons."

Hy en Hermien druk deur die mense in hulle ry, wat kla omdat hulle moet opstaan. Die studente in Hagrid se ry probeer bloot om hulle so klein moontlik te hou.

"Ek waardeer dit baie, julle, regtig," sê Hagrid toe hulle by die trappe kom. Hy kyk gespanne rond terwyl hulle oor die grasperk stap. "Ek hoop net nie sy sien ons wegloop nie."

"Bedoel jy Umbridge?" sê Harry. "Sy sal nie. Het jy nie gesien hoe haar hele Onderzoektaakmag om haar sit nie? Sy verwag seker moeilikheid by hierdie wedstryd."

"Ja, wel, 'n bietjie moeilikheid kan nie kwaad doen nie," sê Hagrid. Hy gaan staan en loer om die kant van die pawiljoen of daar iemand tussen hulle en sy hut is. "Sal ons meer tyd gee."

"Wat gaan aan, Hagrid?" vra Hermien bekommerd terwyl hulle oor die grasperk na die rand van die Verbode Woud draf.

"Julle – julle sal nou-nou sien." Hagrid kyk oor sy skouer toe 'n gejuig van die pawiljoen af opstyg. "Hei, het iemand 'n doel gekry?"

"Dit sal Raweklou wees," sê Harry swaarmoedig.

"Goed . . . goed . . ." sê Hagrid afgetrokke. "Dis goed . . ."

Harry en Hermien moet draf om by te hou terwyl Hagrid met lang tree oor die grasperk stap en met elke tweede tree omkyk. Toe hulle by sy hut kom, draai Hermien outomaties links na die voordeur. Hagrid stap egter aan na die skadu van die bome aan die rand van die Woud en tel sy kruisboog op wat hy teen 'n boom staan.

gemaak het. Toe hy besef dat hulle nie agter hom is nie, kyk hy om.

"Ons gaan hierheen," beduie hy met sy ruie kop.

"Na die Woud?" sê Hermien verward.

"Ja," sê Hagrid. "Komaan, opskud, voor iemand ons sien."

Harry en Hermien loer na mekaar voor hulle agter die bome wegkoes en Hagrid volg wat reeds deur die groen skemerte stap, sy kruisboog oor sy arm. Hulle moet draf om hom in te haal.

"Hagrid, hoekom is jy gewapen?" vra Harry.

Hagrid skud sy massiewe skouers. "Net 'n voorsorgmaatreël."

"Jy't nie jou kruisboog saamgebring die dag toe jy die restralle vir ons gaan wys het nie," sê Hermien.

"Nee, maar ons het toe nie so diep ingegaan nie. En in elk geval, dit was voor Firenze uit die Woud is."

"Wat het Firenze daarmee te doen?" vra Hermien nuuskierig.

"Omdat die ander sentours vir my kwaad is, dis hoekom." Hagrid kyk om hom rond. "Hulle was altyd – wel, nou nie juis vriendelik nie – maar ons het darem oor die weg gekom. Hulle hou hulle eenkant, maar hulle het nog altyd gekom as ek vir hulle iets wou sê. Nou nie meer nie." Hy sug diep.

"Firenze het gesê hulle is kwaad omdat hy vir Dompeldorius werk," sê Harry en struikel oor 'n boomwortel omdat hy Hagrid se gesig dophou.

"Ja," sê Hagrid swaarmoedig. "Wel, kwaad is nie die woord nie. Dis meer soos die bliksem in. As ek nie ingegryp het nie, het hulle vir Firenze doodgeskop –"

"Hulle het hom aangeval?" vra Hermien geskok.

"Jip," sê Hagrid skor en stoot 'n paar lae takke uit die pad. "Die helfte van die kudde was op hom."

"En jy't hulle gekeer?" sê Harry verbaas en beïndruk. "Alleen?"

"Natuurlik het ek, ek kon nie staan en kyk hoe hulle hom doodmaak nie! Dis 'n geluk dat ek daar was . . . en ek sou dink Firenze sou dankbaar wees en nie vir my simpel waarskuwings stuur nie!" voeg Hagrid gekrenk by.

Harry en Hermien kyk verbaas na mekaar, maar Hagrid brei nie verder uit nie.

"In elk geval," sê hy en haal nog swaarder as gewoonlik asem, "van toe af is die ander sentours die dinges in vir my. En die probleem is, hulle het baie sê in die Woud . . . is die slimste van almal."

"Is dit hoekom ons hier is, Hagrid?" vra Hermien. "Oor die sentours?"

"Nee, nee," Hagrid skud sy kop afwysend, "nee, dis nie oor hulle

nie. Wel, hulle kan sake natuurlik vererger. Maar julle sal nou-nou sien wat ek bedoel."

Op hierdie duistere noot word hy weer stil en stap vooruit, elke tree drie keer so groot as een van Harry-hulle s'n, sodat hulle met moeite bybly.

Hoe dieper hulle die Woud instap, hoe ruier word die paadjie en die bome staan so dig opmekaar dat dit skemerdonker is. Hulle is reeds verby die oop plek waar Hagrid die tesralle vir hulle gewys het, maar Harry begin eers regtig skrikkerig voel toe Hagrid die paadjie ewe skielik verlaat en deur die bome na die hart van die Woud begin stap.

"Hagrid!" Harry moet 'n pad oopdruk deur die vergroeide braamtakke waaroor Hagrid met gemak getree het. Hy onthou baie goed wat die vorige keer gebeur het toe hy die paadjie verlaat het. "Waarheen gaan ons?"

"'n Entjie verder," sê Hagrid oor sy skouer. "Komaan, Harry ons moet nou bymekaar bly."

Dis moeilik om by te hou met al die takke en dorings waardeur Hagrid stap asof hulle spinnerakke is, maar wat aan Harry en Hermien se klere haak sodat hulle soms 'n paar minute lank moet stop om hulle los te sukkel. Harry se arms en bene is gou vol snye en skrape. Hulle is al so diep in die Woud dat Hagrid soms net 'n massiewe donker vorm voor hulle is en enige geluid soos 'n bedreiging klink. 'n Takkie wat kraak, klink oorverdowend en die kleinste ritseling van selfs 'n onskadelike mossie veroorsaak dat Harry deur die skemerdonker loer om te sien wat dit was. Hy besef skielik dat hy nog nooit so diep in die Woud was sonder om die een of ander dier raak te loop nie en wonder angstig hoekom dit so stil is.

"Hagrid, kan ons maar ons towerstawwe aansteek?" vra Hermien saggies.

"Hm... oukei," fluister Hagrid terug. "Ek moet seker –"

Hy stop skielik en swaai om. Hermien loop in hom vas en struikel oor haar eie voete. Harry vang haar net voor sy neerslaan.

"Ons moet seker 'n rukkie stop sodat ek... vir julle kan vertel wat aangaan," sê Hagrid. "Voor ons daar kom."

"Jip-pie!" sê Hermien toe Harry haar los. Hulle mompel albei "Lumos!" en die punte van hul towerstawwe onbrand. Hagrid se gesig swem nader in die flikkerende lig van die twee ligbane, en Harry sien weer hoe gespanne en bekommerd hy lyk.

"Goed," sê Hagrid. "Wel... julle sien... die ding is..." Hy trek sy asem diep in. "Wel, daar's 'n goeie kans dat ek die trekpas gaan kry."

Harry en Hermien kyk na mekaar en dan weer na hom.

“Maar dit gaan dan so goed –” sê Hermien huiwerig. “Wat laat jou dink –”

“Umbridge dink dit was ek wat daardie niffler in haar kantoor gesit het.”

“En was dit?” vra Harry voor hy homself kan keer.

“Nee, dit was verbrands nie!” sê Hagrid verontwaardig. “Dis net dat sy dink alles wat met magiese kreature te doen het, is my werk. Sy soek al vandat ek teruggekom het ’n rede om van my ontslae te raak. Natuurlik wil ek nie weggaan nie, maar as dit nie was vir . . . die spesiale omstandighede waarvan ek julle nou gaan vertel nie, het ek geloop voor sy dit voor die hele skool doen soos met Trelawney.”

Harry en Hermien snork albei in protes, maar Hagrid hou een van sy enorme hande op.

“Dis nie die einde van die wêreld nie. Ek sal vir Dompeldorius kan help as ek eers hier uit is. Ek sal iets beteken vir die Orde. En julle het vir Growweblaar, julle – julle sal orraait wees vir die eksamen . . .”

Sy stem bewe en breek.

“Moenie julle oor my bekommer nie,” sê hy vinnig toe Hermien sy massiewe voorarm wil streel. Hy haal ’n tamaai kolletjiesakdoek uit sy onderbaadjie se sak en vee oor sy oë. “Luister, ek sou dit nie vir julle vertel het as ek nie moes nie. Julle sien, as ek moet loop wel, ek kan nie gaan sonder . . . sonder om vir iemand te sê nie omdat ek – wel, ek het julle twee nodig. En vir Ron as hy wil.”

“Natuurlik sal ons jou help,” sê Harry dadelik. “Wat moet ons doen?”

Hagrid snuif luid en klop vir Harry so hard op die skouer dat hy sydelings teen ’n boom val.

“Ek het geweet julle sal ja sê,” mompel hy in sy sakdoek, “maar ek sal . . . nooit . . . vergeet . . . wel, komaan . . . net nog ’n entjie . . . hierlangs . . . oppas vir die brandnetels . . .”

Hulle stap in stilte vir nog sowat vyftien minute. Harry het net sy mond oopgemaak om te vra hoe ver nog, toe Hagrid sy regterhand uitgooi en wys hulle moet stop.

“Stadig nou,” fluister hy. “En saggies . . .”

Hulle sluip vorentoe en Harry sien ’n yslike gladde hoop grond amper so hoog soos Hagrid wat hy veronderstel die lêplek van die een of ander tamaai dier moet wees. Bome is met wortel en tak uitgeruk sodat die hoop grond omring is deur hope stompe en takke wat ’n soort heining vorm waaragter Harry, Hermien en Hagrid nou staan.

"Hy slaap," prewel Hagrid.

Harry hoor 'n ritmiese, rammelende geluid soos 'n paar reusagtige longe wat asemhaal. Hy kyk sydelings na Hermien, wat oopmond na die hoop grond staar. Sy lyk tot die dood toe bang.

"Hagrid," fluister sy skaars hoorbaar bo die geluide wat die slapende wese maak, "wie is hy?"

Dis vir Harry 'n baie snaakse vraag. Hy was van plan om "Wat is dit?" te vra.

"Hagrid, jy't vir ons gesê –" begin Hermien en die towerstaf in haar hand bewe, "jy't vir ons gesê niemand wou kom nie!"

Harry kyk van haar na Hagrid en toe hy skielik besef wat aangaan, kyk hy met 'n benoude kreet na die hoop grond.

Die tamaai hoop grond waarop hy, Hermien en Hagrid maklik sou kon staan, beweeg stadig op en neer in pas met die diep snorkende asemhaling. Dis nie 'n hoop grond nie, maar die krom rug van wat baie duidelik –

"Wel – nee – hy wou nie eintlik kom nie," sê Hagrid en hy klink radeloos. "Maar ek moes hom bring, Hermien, ek moes!"

"Maar hoekom?" vra Hermien, wat lyk of sy wil huil. "Hoekom – vir wat – ai, Hagrid!"

"Ek het gedink as ek hom net kan terugbring," Hagrid klink of hy ook na aan trane is, "en – en hom 'n bietjie maniere leer – sal ek hom kan uitneem en vir almal kan wys dat hy skadeloos is!"

"Skadeloos!" sê Hermien skril en Hagrid beduie angstig dat sy sagter moet praat terwyl die enorme wese voor hulle hard steun en in sy slaap roer. "Dis hy wat jou so seermaak, nè? Dis hoekom jy so lyk!"

"Hy ken nie sy krag nie," verweer Hagrid. "En hy raak al beter, hy's nie meer so bakleierig nie –"

"Dis dan hoekom dit jou twee maande gevat het om terug te kom!" sê Hermien afgetrokke. "O, Hagrid, hoekom het jy hom saamgebring as hy nie wou kom nie? Hy sal mos gelukkiger tussen sy eie mense wees?"

"Hulle't hom geboelie, Hermien, omdat hy so klein is!" sê Hagrid.

"Klein?" sê Hermien. "Klein?"

"Hermien, ek kon hom nie net daar los nie." Trane stroom oor Hagrid se gekneusde gesig tot in sy baard. "Jy sien – hy's my boetie!" Hermien staar oopmond na hom.

"Boetie? Bedoel jy . . ." sê Harry stadig.

"Wel – halfbroer," verbeter Hagrid. "My ma't glo ná my pa by 'n reus gebly en toe't sy vir Ghrop gehad –"

"Ghrop?" sê Harry.

"Ja . . . wel, dis hoe dit klink as hy sy naam sê," sê Hagrid angstig. "Hy praat nie eintlik ons taal nie . . . ek probeer hom leer. In elk geval, dit lyk of sy net so min van hom gehou het as van my. Julle sien, wat by reuse tel, is mooi groot kinders en hy was nog altyd 'n bietjie tingerig vir 'n reus – net so vyf meter –"

"O ja, baie tingerig!" sê Hermien sarkasties en histeries. "So te sê 'n dwerg!"

"Almal het hom rondgeskop – ek kon hom nie daar los nie –"

"Wou Madame Maxime hom ook terugbring?" vra Harry.

"Sy – wel, sy kon sien dis vir my belangrik," Hagrid wring sy enorme hande. "Maar – maar ek moet erken sy't later 'n bietjie moeg geword vir hom . . . en toe't elkeen sy eie pad huis toe gevolg maar sy't belowe om vir niemand te sê nie . . ."

"Hoe op aarde het jy hom hier gekry sonder dat iemand hom gesien het?" vra Harry.

"Wel, dis hoekom dit so lank gevat het. Ons kon net snags reis deur wilde dele en so aan. Hy stap natuurlik baie vinnig as hy wil, maar hy wou die hele tyd teruggaan."

"O, Hagrid, hoekom het jy hom nie laat teruggaan nie?" Hermien sak op 'n boomstomp neer met haar gesig in haar hande. "Wat het jy gedink gaan jy met 'n wilde reus doen wat nie eens hier wil wees nie?"

"Wel, hoor hier – 'wild' – dis 'n bietjie erg," sê Hagrid verontwaardig. "Goed, hy het my 'n paar keer gemoker as hy in 'n slegte bui is, maar hy is al baie beter, baie beter, hy pas goed aan."

"Waarvoor is die toue?" vra Harry.

Hy het die toue pas raak gesien. Hulle is so dik soos jong boompies en strek van die stamme van die naaste groot bome na die plek waar Ghrop opgekrul op die grond met sy rug na hulle lê.

"Jy moet hom vasmaak?" vra Hermien floutjies.

"Wel . . . ja . . ." Hagrid lyk benoud. "Julle sien – dis soos ek gesê het – hy ken nie sy eie krag nie."

Harry begryp nou hoekom daar nie diere in hierdie deel van die Woud is nie.

"Wat wil jy hê moet ek en Harry en Ron doen?" vra Hermien onseker.

"Na hom kyk," sê Hagrid skor. "Nadat ek weg is."

Harry en Hermien staar verslae na mekaar. Harry is baie bewus daarvan dat hy reeds vir Hagrid belowe het dat hy hom met enigiets sal help.

"Wat – presies behels dit?" vra Hermien.

"Nie voer of iets nie!" sê Hagrid vinnig. "Hy kan sy eie kos kry, dis

nie 'n probleem nie. Voëls en bokke en goed . . . nee, dis geselskap wat hy moet hê. As ek net kan weet julle probeer hom help probeer hom leer, julle weet."

Harry antwoord nie, maar kyk weer na die reusagtige vorm wat vas aan die slaap op die grond lê. Anders as Hagrid, wat soos 'n oorgroot mens lyk, lyk Ghrop misvorm. Wat Harry gedink het 'n mosbegroeide rots is, is al die tyd Ghrop se kop. Dis baie groter in verhouding tot sy liggaam as mense s'n en is amper koeëlronde en begroei met digte, varinggroen krulhare. Die rand van 'n enkele vlesige oor is sigbaar bo-op sy kop, wat op sy beurt, nes oom Vernon s'n, totaal nekloos op sy skouers rus. Sy rug is baie breed en hy dra 'n vuil bruin jas van diervelle wat met groot steke aanmekaar gewerk is en meegee soos hy asemhaal. Sy bene is onder sy lyf opgekrul en Harry sien die sole van enorme vuil kaal voete so groot soos sleë, wat oormekaar gekruis op die woudvloer rus.

"Jy wil hê ons moet hom leer," sê Harry in 'n hol stem. Hy verstaan nou wat Firenze se waarskuwing beteken het. Sy poging werk nie. Hy moet dit eerder laat vaar. Natuurlik het die ander diere in die Woud Hagrid se vrugtelose pogings gehoor om Ghrop te leer praat.

"Ja – al praat julle net 'n bietjie met hom," sê Hagrid hoopvol. "Want ek dink as hy met mense in hulle taal kan praat, sal hy beter verstaan dat ons eintlik van hom hou en wil hê hy moet hier bly."

Harry kyk na Hermien, wat deur haar vingers na hom loer.

"Laat jou half wens Norbert was nog hier, hê?" sê hy en sy lag bewering.

"Dan sal julle dit doen?" vra Hagrid gretig. Hy het duidelik nie gesnap wat Harry bedoel nie.

"Wel . . ." sê Harry, wat voel dat hy reeds deur sy belofte gebind is. "Ons sal kyk wat ons kan doen, Hagrid."

"Ek het geweet ek kan op jou staatmaak, Harry!" Hagrid straal tranerig en druk sy gesig met sy sakdoek droog. "En julle hoef nie te veel moeite te doen nie . . . ek weet julle het eksamens . . . as julle net so een keer per week onder die onsigbaarheidsmantel hierheen kan kom en 'n bietjie met hom gesels. Ek maak hom gou wakker – om julle voor te stel –"

"Wak- neel!" gil Hermien en spring op. "Hagrid, nee, moet hom nie wakker maak nie, dis regtig nie nodig –"

Maar Hagrid het reeds oor die groot boomstomp voor hulle getree. Toe hy omtrent drie meter van Ghrop af is, tel hy 'n tak op, glimlag gerusstellend oor sy skouer vir Harry en Hermien en steek vir Ghrop hard in die rug met die tak se punt.

Die reus los 'n brul wat deur die stil Woud weergalm en voëls uit die hoogste bome laat opvlieg. Toe staan die reusagtige Ghrop van die grond af op, wat bewes toe hy met sy tamaai hand daarteen druk en hom op sy knieë stoot. Hy draai sy kop om te sien wie of wat hom gesteur het.

"Is alles reg, Ghroppie?" vra Hagrid gemaak vrolik. Hy tree agteruit met die tak voor hom, gereed om weer vir Ghrop te steek. "Het jy lekker geslapies?"

Harry en Hermien val so ver moontlik terug terwyl hulle die reus in die oog hou. Ghrop staan op sy knieë tussen twee bome wat hy nog nie uitgeruk het nie. Hulle kyk op na sy ontsaglike groot gesig wat soos 'n grys maan in die skemerte hang. Dis of sy gelaatstrekke uit 'n yslike ronde rots gekerf is. Die neus is stomp en vormloos, die mond skeef en vol misvormde geel tande so groot soos halwe bakstene, die oë, klein vir 'n reus, is 'n modderige groenbruin kleur en op die oomblik half toegeplak met slaap. Ghrop lig sy vuil kneukels, elkeen so groot soos 'n krieketbal, en vryf oor sy oë. Toe, sonder waarskuwing en verbasend rats, kom hy orent.

"Oe, tog!" skree Hermien benoud langs Harry.

Die bome waaraan die toue om Ghrop se gewigte en enkels vasgemaak is, kraak dreigend. Soos Hagrid gesê het, is hy minstens vyf meter lank. Hy gluur slaperig rond, steek 'n hand so groot soos 'n strandsambreel uit, haal 'n voël nes bo uit 'n denneboom en keer dit om. Hy brul ontstoke toe daar geen voël in is nie. Die eiers val grond toe en Hagrid keer met sy arms oor sy kop.

"Wel, Ghroppie," skree Hagrid en loer benoud boontoe ingeval daar nog eiers is, "ek het 'n paar vriende gebring om jou te ontmoet. Ek het mos vir jou gesê. Jy onthou seker nog ek moet dalk 'n rukkie weggaan? Hulle sal dan na jou kyk, onthou jy, Ghroppie?"

Ghrop uiter nog 'n lae brul. Dis moeilik om te weet of hy na Hagrid luister of nie, en of hy selfs hoegenaamd weet dat die geluide wat Hagrid maak woorde is. Hy gryp die denneboom aan die punt en buig dit oor asof hy wil kyk hoe ver dit sal terugskiet wanneer hy dit laat los.

"Nee, Ghroppie, moenie!" skree Hagrid. "Dis hoe jy al die ander uitgetrek het!"

Harry sien hoe die grond om die denneboom se wortels reeds begin kraak.

"Ek het geselskap gebring!" skree Hagrid. "Geselskap! Kyk af, jou groot aap, hier is vriende!"

"O, Hagrid, moenie," kerm Hermien, maar Hagrid het reeds die tak gelig en vir Ghrop 'n harde hou op die knie gegee.

Die reus los die boom wat gevaarlik swaai en dennenaalde op Hagrid laat reën. Toe kyk hy af.

"Dit," sê Hagrid en draf na Harry en Hermien, "is Harry, Ghrop! Harry Potter! Hy gaan vir jou kom kuier! Ek moet dalk weggaan, verstaan jy?"

Die reus het pas eers besef dat Harry en Hermien daar is. Hulle kyk benoud na hom op toe hy sy rotsagtige kop laat sak en met leepoë na hulle staar.

"En dis Hermien, sien? Her –" Hagrid aarsel, draai na Hermien en sê: "Sal jy omgee as hy jou Hemmie noem, Hermien? Dis 'n moeilike naam vir hom om te onthou."

"O nee, glad nie," piep Hermien.

"Dis Hemmie, Ghrop! En sy gaan ook kom kuier en alles! Is dit nie gaaf nie, hm? Twee vriende vir jou – GHROP, NEE!"

Ghrop se hand skiet asof van nêrens na Hermien. Harry pluk haar net betyds agter die boom in en Ghrop se vuus sluit skadeloos in die lug voor die stam.

"STOUTE GHROP!" skree Hagrid terwyl Hermien kermend aan Harry klou. "BAIE STOUT! 'N MENS GRYP NIE – EINA!"

Harry loer om die boomstam en sien dat Hagrid op sy rug lê met sy hand oor sy neus. Ghrop, wat lyk asof hy belangstelling verloor het, is reeds weer besig om die denneboom so ver moontlik oor te buig.

"Goed," sê Hagrid gesmoord en staan op, een hand oor sy bloeiende neus en die kruisboog in die ander een, "wel . . . daar het julle dit . . . julle't hom ontmoet en – en nou sal hy julle ken as julle vir hom kom kuier. Nou ja . . . wel . . ."

Hy kyk op na Ghrop wat besig is om die denneboom met kragende wortels uit die grond te trek, 'n uitdrukking van uiterste plesier op sy rotsgesig.

"Wel, dis genoeg vir een dag," sê Hagrid. "Ons – hm – ons sal maar teruggaan, of hoe?"

Harry en Hermien knik. Hagrid swaai sy kruisboog oor sy skouer en stap vooruit, sy hand nog steeds oor sy neus.

Niemand praat nie, nie eens toe hulle aan die gekraak in die verte hoor dat Ghrop die boom uiteindelik uitgetrek het nie. Hermien se gesig is bleek en stroef. Harry weet nie wat om te sê nie. Wat op aarde gaan gebeur as iemand moet uitvind dat Hagrid vir Ghrop in die Verbode Woud wegsteek? En hy het belowe dat hy, Ron en Hermien sal voortgaan met Hagrid se nuttelose pogings om die reus maniere te leer. Hoe kan Hagrid – selfs met sy ongelooflike vermoë om te glo dat monsters met groot slagande liefdevolle en skadelose troeteldiere is – hom verbeel dat Ghrop ooit by mense sal inpas?

“Wag ’n bietjie,” sê Hagrid skielik terwyl Harry en Hermien deur ’n kol digte duisendknoopgras sukkel. Hy haal ’n pyl uit die koker oor sy skouer en sit dit in die kruisboog. Harry en Hermien lig hul towerstawwe. Noudat hulle stilstaan, hoor hulle ook die beweging daar naby.

“Vervlaks,” sê Hagrid saggies.

“Ek dag ons het vir jou gesê, Hagrid,” sê ’n diep stem, “dat jy nie meer hier welkom is nie?”

’n Man se naakte bolyf dryf uit die gespikkelde groen halflig na hulle toe. Dan sien hulle waar sy middel by ’n perd se kastaiingbruin lyf aansluit. Die sentour het ’n trotse gesig met hoë wangbene en lang swart hare. Soos Hagrid is hy gewapen, ’n koker vol pyle en ’n lang boog hang oor sy skouers.

“Hoe gaan dit, Magorian?” vra Hagrid behoedsaam.

Die bome agter die sentour ritsel en nog vier of vyf sentours kom te voorskyn. Harry herken Bane met sy swart liggaam en baard. Hy het hom amper vier jaar gelede saam met Firenze ontmoet. Bane gee geen teken dat hy Harry herken het nie.

“So,” sê hy met ’n nare klank in sy stem voor hy na Magorian draai. “Ons het mos ooreengekom wat ons gaan doen as hierdie mens weer sy gesig in die Woud wys?”

“Hierdie mens’ is nou seker ek?” sê Hagrid vererg. “Net omdat ek julle gekeer het toe julle ’n moord wou pleeg?”

“Jy moes nie ingemeng het nie, Hagrid!” sê Magorian. “Ons weë verskil van julle s’n en so ook ons witte. Firenze het ons verraa en onteer.”

“Ek weet nie hoe jy daarby uitkom nie,” sê Hagrid ongeduldig. “Hy help maar net vir Albus Dompeldorius –”

“Firenze staan in diens van die mense,” sê ’n grys sentour met ’n harde, diep beplooide gesig.

“Diens?” sê Hagrid minagtend. “Hy doen vir Dompeldorius ’n guns, dis al –”

“Hy verkoop ons kennis en geheime aan die mense,” sê Magorian sag. “Dis ’n skande waarvan hy nooit sal herstel nie.”

“As jy so sê,” Hagrid haal sy skouers op. “Maar ek dink jy maak ’n fout –”

“Nes jy, mens,” sê Bane, “deur terug te kom na ons Woud nadat ons jou gewaarsku het –”

“Nou luister julle vir my,” sê Hagrid ergerlik. “Dis nie ‘julle’ Woud nie, oukei? Dis nie vir julle om te sê wie hierheen mag kom nie –”

“En ook nie vir jou nie, Hagrid,” sê Magorian glad. “Ek sal jou vandag oorsien omdat jou twee jong –”

"Hulle is nie syne nie!" sis Bane minagrend. "Hulle is studente, Magorian, van die skool! Hulle het waarskynlik reeds baat gevind by Firenze se onderrig!"

"Nogtans," sê Magorian kalm, "dis 'n vreeslike misdaad om vulletjies te vermoor – ons raak nie aan die onskuldiges nie. Vandag kan jy gaan, Hagrid. Maar van nou af bly jy weg. Jy het die vriendskap van die sentours verbeur toe jy die verraaier Firenze gehelp het om te ontsnap."

"Ek sal my nie uit die Woud laat hou deur 'n spul ou muile soos julle nie!" sê Hagrid hard.

"Hagrid," sê Hermien in 'n skril, verskrikte stemmetjie terwyl Bane en die grys sentour die grond met hul voorpote kap, "kom ons gaan net, asseblief!"

Hagrid gee 'n tree vorentoe met sy kruisboog nog steeds gelig en kyk dreigend na Magorian.

"Ons weet wat jy in die Woud aanhou, Hagrid!" skree Magorian toe die sentours begin weggliip. "En ons verdraagsaamheid is besig om min te raak!"

Hagrid kyk om en dit lyk of hy dit oorweeg om Magorian agterna te sit.

"Julle sal hom verdra solank hy hier is, dis net soveel sy Woud as julle s'n!" skree hy terwyl Harry en Hermien met alle mag aan sy molvelonderbaadjie trek in 'n poging om hom te laat aanstap. Hy kyk fronsend af en lyk verbaas toe hy sien wat hulle probeer doen, asof hy dit nie eens gevoel het nie.

"Bedaar, julle twee," sê hy toe hy omdraai en begin aanstap terwyl hulle hygend langs hom draf. "Verbrande ou muile, hê?"

"Hagrid," sê Hermien uitasem terwyl hulle om die lap brandnetels van vroeër stap, "as die sentours nie mense in die Woud wil hê nie, hoe kan ek en Harry –"

"A, maar julle het mos gehoor wat sê hy," sê Hagrid vinnig. "Hulle maak nie vulletjies seer nie – ek bedoel, kinders. In elk geval, ek sal my nie deur daai klomp laat rondstoot nie."

"Goeie probeerslag," brom Harry vir Hermien, wat opnuut moede-loos lyk.

Uiteindelik is hulle by die pad en binne tien minute begin die bome minder raak. Hulle kan kolle blou lug sien en 'n geskree en gejuig in die verte hoor.

"Was dit nog 'n doel?" vra Hagrid en stop in die koelte van die bome van waar die Kwiddiekstadion sigbaar is. "Of dink julle die wedstryd is verby?"

"Ek weet nie," sê Hermien mistroostig. Sy lyk sleg. Haar hare is

vol takkies en blare, haar kleeed is op 'n paar plekke geskeur en daar is talle skrape op haar gesig en arms. Harry weet hy lyk niks beter nie.

“Ek sou sê dis verby, weet julle!” sê Hagrid wat nog steeds deur skrefiesoë na die stadion staar. “Kyk, daar kom die mense – as julle twee gou maak, sal julle saam met hulle kan stap en dan sal niemand weet julle was hier nie!”

“Goeie plan,” sê Harry. “Wel . . . sien jou later, Hagrid!”

“Ek glo dit nie,” sê Hermien die oomblik toe Hagrid buite hoorafstand is. “Ek glo dit nie. Ek glo dit nie!”

“Bedaar,” sê Harry.

“Bedaar?” sê sy koorsig. “'n Reus! 'n Reus in die Woud! En ons moet vir hom taallesse gee? Natuurlik mits ons verby daardie trop moorddadige sentours kan kom! Ek – glo – dit – nie!”

“Ons hoef nog niks te doen nie,” sê Harry onderlangs terwyl hulle saam met 'n stroom geselsende Hoesenproesers kasteel toe stap. “Hy't net vir ons gevra om iets te doen indien hy uitgeskop word, en dalk gebeur dit nie eens nie!”

“O, komaan, Harry!” sê Hermien verwoed en steek vas sodat die mense agter haar moet swenk om nie in haar vas te loop nie. “Natuurlik gaan hy uitgegooi word! En regtig, ná wat ek so pas gesien het, kan ek nie vir Umbridge blameer nie!”

Daar is 'n stilte waarin Harry na haar staar, terwyl haar oë vol tranes skiet.

“Jy bedoel dit nie,” sê Harry stadig.

“Nee . . . wel . . . goed . . . nie regtig nie,” sê sy en vee haar oë ergerlik af. “Maar hoekom moet hy die lewe so moeilik maak vir homself – en vir ons?”

“Ek weet nie –”

“Weasley is ons Koning

Weasley is ons Koning

Hy laat geen Swelger in die ring

Weasley is ons Koning . . .”

“Ek wens hulle wil ophou om daardie simpel lied te sing,” sê Hermien miserabel. “Hoekom moet hulle so aanhou daarmee?”

'n Golf studente beweeg van die veld af op oor die grasperke.

“Kom ons loop voor die Slibberins kom,” sê Hermien.

"Weasley kan goed kring en kring,
Hy hou die Swelger uit die ring,
Dis hoekom Griffindor hard sing,
Weasley is ons Koning."

"Hermien . . ." sê Harry stadig.

Die lied word al harder, maar dit kom nie uit die groep groen-en-silwer Slibberins se kele nie, maar van 'n massa rooi-en-goud wat stadig kasteel toe stap met 'n enkele figuur op hulle skouers.

"Weasley is ons Koning
Weasley is ons Koning
Hy laat geen Swelger in die ring
Weasley is ons Koning . . ."

"Nee?" sê Hermien gedemp.

"JA!" skree Harry.

"HARRY! HERMIEN!" skree Ron en waai die silwer Kwiddiek-beker in die lug. Hy lyk buite homself van vreugde. "ONS HET DIT REGGEKRY! ONS HET GEWEN!"

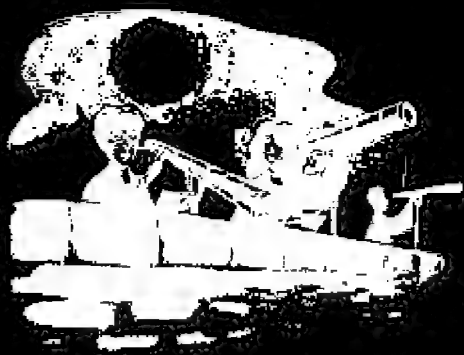
Hulle kyk verstom na hom terwyl hy verbygedra word. Daar is 'n gemaal voor die kasteel se deure en Ron se kop tref die kosyn met 'n slag, maar niemand wil hom neersit nie. Die menigte stap singend deur die ingangsportaal en verdwyn. Harry en Hermien kyk hulle glimlaggend agterna tot die laaste weergalmende note van "Weasley is ons Koning" weggesteef het. Toe kyk hulle na mekaar en hul gesigte word strak.

"Ons bêre ons nuus tot môre, of hoe?" sê Harry.

"Ja, oukei," sê Hermien moeg. "Daar is geen haas nie."

Hulle stap saam met die trappe op. By die voordeur kyk hulle instinktief terug na die Verbode Woud. Harry is nie seker of dit net sy verbeelding is nie, maar hy dink hy sien 'n wolkie voëls in die lug bo die bome, amper asof die boom waarin hulle nesmaak skielik uitgeruk is.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



O.W.L.S

Ron's euphoria at helping Gryffindor scrape the Quidditch Cup was such that he could not settle to anything next day. All he wanted to do was talk over the match and Harry and Hermione found it very difficult to find an opening in which to mention Grawp — not that either of them tried very hard; neither was keen to be the one to bring Ron back to reality in quite such a brutal fashion. As it was another fine, warm day, they persuaded him to join them in studying under the beech tree on the edge of the lake, where they stood less chance of being overheard than in the common room. Ron was not particularly keen on this idea at first; he was thoroughly enjoying being patted on the back by Gryffindors walking past his chair, not to mention the occasional outbursts of “Weasley Is Our King,” but agreed after a while that some fresh air might do him good.

They spread their books out in the shade of the beech tree and sat

down while Ron talked them through his first save of the match for what felt like the dozenth time.

“Well, I mean, I’d already let in that one of Davies’s, so I wasn’t feeling that confident, but I dunno, when Bradley came toward me, just out of nowhere, I thought — *you can do this!* And I had about a second to decide which way to fly, you know, because he looked like he was aiming for the right goal hoop — my right, obviously, his left — but I had a funny feeling that he was feinting, and so I took the chance and flew left — his right, I mean — and — well — you saw what happened,” he concluded modestly, sweeping his hair back quite unnecessarily so that it looked interestingly windswept and glancing around to see whether the people nearest to them — a bunch of gossiping third-year Hufflepuffs — had heard him. “And then, when Chambers came at me about five minutes later — what?” Ron said, stopping mid-sentence at the look on Harry’s face. “Why are you grinning?”

“I’m not,” said Harry quickly, looking down at his Transfiguration notes and attempting to straighten his face. The truth was that Ron had just reminded Harry forcibly of another Gryffindor Quidditch player who had once sat rumpling his hair under this very tree. “I’m just glad we won, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” said Ron slowly, savoring the words, “*we won*. Did you see the look on Chang’s face when Ginny got the Snitch right out from under her nose?”

“I suppose she cried, did she?” said Harry bitterly.

“Well, yeah — more out of temper than anything, though . . .” Ron frowned slightly. “But you saw her chuck her broom away when she

got back to the ground, didn't you?"

"Er —" said Harry.

"Well, actually . . . no, Ron," said Hermione with a heavy sigh, putting down her book and looking at him apologetically. "As a matter of fact, the only bit of the match Harry and I saw was Davies's first goal."

Ron's carefully ruffled hair seemed to wilt with disappointment.

"You didn't watch?" he said faintly, looking from one to the other. "You didn't see me make any of those saves?"

"Well — no," said Hermione, stretching out a placatory hand toward him. "But Ron, we didn't want to leave — we had to!"

"Yeah?" said Ron, whose face was growing rather red. "How come?"

"It was Hagrid," said Harry. "He decided to tell us why he's been covered in injuries ever since he got back from the giants. He wanted us to go into the forest with him, we had no choice, you know how he gets. . . . Anyway . . ."

The story was told in five minutes, by the end of which Ron's indignation had been replaced by a look of total incredulity.

"He brought one back and hid it in the forest?"

"Yep," said Harry grimly.

"No," said Ron, as though by saying this he could make it untrue. "No, he can't have . . ."

"Well, he has," said Hermione firmly. "Grawp's about sixteen feet tall, enjoys ripping up twenty-foot pine trees, and knows me," she snorted, "as *Herm*y."

Ron gave a nervous laugh.

“And Hagrid wants us to . . . ?”

“Teach him English, yeah,” said Harry.

“He’s lost his mind,” said Ron in an almost awed voice.

“Yes,” said Hermione irritably, turning a page of *Intermediate Transfiguration* and glaring at a series of diagrams showing an owl turning into a pair of opera glasses. “Yes, I’m starting to think he has. But unfortunately, he made Harry and me promise.”

“Well, you’re just going to have to break your promise, that’s all,” said Ron firmly. “I mean, come on . . . We’ve got exams and we’re about that far,” he held up his hand to show thumb and forefinger a millimeter apart, “from being chucked out as it is. And anyway . . . remember Norbert? Remember Aragog? Have we ever come off better for mixing with any of Hagrid’s monster mates?”

“I know, it’s just that — we promised,” said Hermione in a small voice.

Ron smoothed his hair flat again, looking preoccupied.

“Well,” he sighed, “Hagrid hasn’t been sacked yet, has he? He’s hung on this long, maybe he’ll hang on till the end of term and we won’t have to go near Grawp at all.”

The castle grounds were gleaming in the sunlight as though freshly painted; the cloudless sky smiled at itself in the smoothly sparkling lake, the satin-green lawns rippled occasionally in a gentle breeze. June had arrived, but to the fifth years this meant only one thing: Their O.W.L.s were upon them at last.

Their teachers were no longer setting them homework, lessons

were devoted to reviewing those topics their teachers thought most likely to come up in the exams. The purposeful, feverish atmosphere drove nearly everything but the O.W.L.s from Harry's mind, though he did wonder occasionally during Potions lessons whether Lupin had ever told Snape that he must continue giving Harry Occlumency tuition. If he had, then Snape had ignored Lupin as thoroughly as he was now ignoring Harry. This suited Harry very well; he was quite busy and tense enough without extra classes with Snape, and to his relief Hermione was much too preoccupied these days to badger him about Occlumency. She was spending a lot of time muttering to herself and had not laid out any elf clothes for days.

She was not the only person acting oddly as the O.W.L.s drew steadily nearer. Ernie Macmillan had developed an irritating habit of interrogating people about their study habits.

"How many hours d'you think you're doing a day?" he demanded of Harry and Ron as they queued outside Herbology, a manic gleam in his eyes.

"I dunno," said Ron. "A few . . ."

"More or less than eight?"

"Less, I s'pose," said Ron, looking slightly alarmed.

"I'm doing eight," said Ernie, puffing out his chest. "Eight or nine. I'm getting an hour in before breakfast every day. Eight's my average. I can do ten on a good weekend day. I did nine and a half on Monday. Not so good on Tuesday — only seven and a quarter. Then on Wednesday —"

Harry was deeply thankful that Professor Sprout ushered them into greenhouse three at that point, forcing Ernie to abandon his recital.

Meanwhile Draco Malfoy had found a different way to induce panic.

“Of course, it’s not what you know,” he was heard to tell Crabbe and Goyle loudly outside Potions a few days before the exams were to start, “it’s who you know. Now, Father’s been friendly with the head of the Wizarding Examinations Authority for years — old Griselda Marchbanks — we’ve had her round for dinner and everything . . .”

“Do you think that’s true?” Hermione whispered to Harry and Ron, looking frightened.

“Nothing we can do about it if it is,” said Ron gloomily.

“I don’t think it’s true,” said Neville quietly from behind them. “Because Griselda Marchbanks is a friend of my gran’s, and she’s never mentioned the Malfoys.”

“What’s she like, Neville?” asked Hermione at once. “Is she strict?”

“Bit like Gran, really,” said Neville in a subdued voice.

“Knowing her won’t hurt your chances though, will it?” Ron told him encouragingly.

“Oh, I don’t think it will make any difference,” said Neville, still more miserably. “Gran’s always telling Professor Marchbanks I’m not as good as my dad. . . . Well . . . you saw what she’s like at St. Mungo’s . . .”

Neville looked fixedly at the floor. Harry, Ron, and Hermione glanced at one another, but didn’t know what to say. It was the first time that Neville had acknowledged that they had met at the Wizarding hospital.

Meanwhile a flourishing black-market trade in aids to concentration, mental agility, and wakefulness had sprung up among the fifth and seventh years. Harry and Ron were much tempted by the bottle of Baruffio's Brain Elixir offered to them by Ravenclaw sixth year Eddie Carmichael, who swore it was solely responsible for the nine "Outstanding" O.W.L.s he had gained the previous summer and was offering the whole pint for a mere twelve Galleons. Ron assured Harry he would reimburse him for his half the moment he left Hogwarts and got a job, but before they could close the deal, Hermione had confiscated the bottle from Carmichael and poured the contents down a toilet.

"Hermione, we wanted to buy that!" shouted Ron.

"Don't be stupid," she snarled. "You might as well take Harold Dingle's powdered dragon claw and have done with it."

"Dingle's got powdered dragon claw?" said Ron eagerly.

"Not anymore," said Hermione. "I confiscated that too. None of these things actually works you know —"

"Dragon claw does work!" said Ron. "It's supposed to be incredible, really gives your brain a boost, you come over all cunning for a few hours — Hermione, let me have a pinch, go on, it can't hurt —"

"This stuff can," said Hermione grimly. "I've had a look at it, and it's actually dried doxy droppings."

This information took the edge off Harry and Ron's desire for brain stimulants.

They received their examination schedules and details of the procedure for O.W.L.s during their next Transfiguration lesson.

“As you can see,” Professor McGonagall told the class while they copied down the dates and times of their exams from the blackboard, “your O.W.L.s are spread over two successive weeks. You will sit the theory exams in the mornings and the practice in the afternoons. Your practical Astronomy examination will, of course, take place at night.

“Now, I must warn you that the most stringent Anti-Cheating Charms have been applied to your examination papers. Auto-Answer Quills are banned from the examination hall, as are Remembralls, Detachable Cribbing Cuffs, and Self-Correcting Ink. Every year, I am afraid to say, seems to harbor at least one student who thinks that he or she can get around the Wizarding Examinations Authority’s rules. I can only hope that it is nobody in Gryffindor. Our new — headmistress” — Professor McGonagall pronounced the word with the same look on her face that Aunt Petunia had whenever she was contemplating a particularly stubborn bit of dirt — “has asked the Heads of House to tell their students that cheating will be punished most severely — because, of course, your examination results will reflect upon the headmistress’s new regime at the school . . .”

Professor McGonagall gave a tiny sigh. Harry saw the nostrils of her sharp nose flare.

“However, that is no reason not to do your very best. You have your own futures to think about.”

“Please, Professor,” said Hermione, her hand in the air, “when will we find out our results?”

“An owl will be sent to you some time in July,” said Professor McGonagall.

“Excellent,” said Dean Thomas in an audible whisper, “so we don’t have to worry about it till the holidays . . .”

Harry imagined sitting in his bedroom in Privet Drive in six weeks’ time, waiting for his O.W.L. results. Well, he thought, at least he would be sure of one bit of post next summer. . . .

Their first exam, Theory of Charms, was scheduled for Monday morning. Harry agreed to test Hermione after lunch on Sunday but regretted it almost at once. She was very agitated and kept snatching the book back from him to check that she had gotten the answer completely right, finally hitting him hard on the nose with the sharp edge of *Achievements in Charming*.

“Why don’t you just do it yourself?” he said firmly, handing the book back to her, his eyes watering.

Meanwhile Ron was reading two years of Charms notes with his fingers in his ears, his lips moving soundlessly; Seamus was lying flat on his back on the floor, reciting the definition of a Substantive Charm, while Dean checked it against *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5*; and Parvati and Lavender, who were practicing basic locomotion charms, were making their pencil cases race each other around the edge of the table.

Dinner was a subdued affair that night. Harry and Ron did not talk much, but ate with gusto, having studied hard all day. Hermione on the other hand kept putting down her knife and fork and diving under the table for her bag, from which she would seize a book to check some fact or figure. Ron was just telling her that she ought to eat a decent meal or she would not sleep that night, when her fork slid from her limp fingers and landed with a loud tinkle on her plate.

“Oh, my goodness,” she said faintly, staring into the entrance hall. “Is that them? Is that the examiners?”

Harry and Ron whipped around on their bench. Through the doors to the Great Hall they could see Umbridge standing with a small group of ancient-looking witches and wizards. Umbridge, Harry was pleased to see, looked rather nervous.

“Shall we go and have a closer look?” said Ron.

Harry and Hermione nodded and they hastened toward the double doors into the entrance hall, slowing down as they stepped over the threshold to walk sedately past the examiners. Harry thought Professor Marchbanks must be the tiny, stooped witch with a face so lined it looked as though it had been draped in cobwebs; Umbridge was speaking to her very deferentially. Professor Marchbanks seemed to be a little deaf; she was answering Umbridge very loudly considering that they were only a foot apart.

“Journey was fine, journey was fine, we’ve made it plenty of times before!” she said impatiently. “Now, I haven’t heard from Dumbledore lately!” she added, peering around the hall as though hopeful he might suddenly emerge from a broom cupboard. “No idea where he is, I suppose?”

“None at all,” said Umbridge, shooting a malevolent look at Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who were now dawdling around the foot of the stairs as Ron pretended to do up his shoelace. “But I daresay the Ministry of Magic will track him down soon enough...”

“I doubt it,” shouted tiny Professor Marchbanks, “not if Dumbledore doesn’t want to be found! I should know... Examined him personally in Transfiguration and Charms when he did

N.E.W.T.s . . . Did things with a wand I'd never seen before . . . ”

“Yes . . . well . . . ” said Professor Umbridge as Harry, Ron, and Hermione dragged their feet up the marble staircase as slowly as they dared, “let me show you to the staffroom . . . I daresay you'd like a cup of tea after your journey . . . ”

It was an uncomfortable sort of an evening. Everyone was trying to do some last-minute studying but nobody seemed to be getting very far. Harry went to bed early but then lay awake for what felt like hours. He remembered his careers consultation and McGonagall's furious declaration that she would help him become an Auror if it was the last thing she did. . . . He wished he had expressed a more achievable ambition now that exam time was here. . . . He knew that he was not the only one lying awake, but none of the others in the dormitory spoke and finally, one by one, they fell asleep.

None of the fifth years talked very much at breakfast next day either. Parvati was practicing incantations under her breath while the salt cellar in front of her twitched, Hermione was rereading *Achievement in Charming* so fast that her eyes appeared blurred, and Neville kept dropping his knife and fork and knocking over the marmalade.

Once breakfast was over, the fifth and seventh years milled around in the entrance hall while the other students went off to lessons. Then, at half-past nine, they were called forward class by class to reenter the Great Hall, which was now arranged exactly as Harry had seen it in the Pensieve when his father, Sirius, and Snape had been taking their O.W.L.s. The four House tables had been removed and replaced instead with many tables for one, all facing the staff-table end of the

Hall where Professor McGonagall stood facing them. When they were all seated and quiet she said, "You may begin," and turned over an enormous hourglass on the desk beside her, on which were also spare quills, ink bottles, and rolls of parchment.

Harry turned over his paper, his heart thumping hard. . . . Three rows to his right and four seats ahead, Hermione was already scribbling. . . . He lowered his eyes to the first question: *a) Give the incantation, and b) describe the wand movement required to make objects fly.* . . .

Harry had a fleeting memory of a club soaring high into the air and landing loudly on the thick skull of a troll. . . . Smiling slightly, he bent over the paper and began to write. . . .

"Well, it wasn't too bad, was it?" asked Hermione anxiously in the entrance hall two hours later, still clutching the exam paper. "I'm not sure I did myself justice on Cheering Charms, I just ran out of time — did you put in the countercharm for hiccups? I wasn't sure whether I ought to, it felt like too much — and on question twenty-three —"

"Hermione," said Ron sternly, "we've been through this before. . . . We're not going through every exam afterward, it's bad enough doing them once."

The fifth years ate lunch with the rest of the school (the four House tables reappeared over the lunch hour) and then trooped off into the small chamber beside the Great Hall, where they were to wait until called for their practical examination. As small groups of students were called forward in alphabetical order, those left behind muttered incantations and practiced wand movements, occasionally poking one

another in the back or eye by mistake.

Hermione's name was called. Trembling, she left the chamber with Anthony Goldstein, Gregory Goyle, and Daphne Greengrass. Students who had already been tested did not return afterward, so Harry and Ron had no idea how Hermione had done.

"She'll be fine — remember she got a hundred and twelve percent on one of our Charms tests?" said Ron.

Ten minutes later, Professor Flitwick called, "Parkinson, Pansy — Patil, Padma — Patil, Parvati — Potter, Harry."

"Good luck," said Ron quietly. Harry walked into the Great Hall, clutching his wand so tightly his hand shook.

"Professor Tofty is free, Potter," squeaked Professor Flitwick, who was standing just inside the door. He pointed Harry toward what looked like the very oldest and baldest examiner, who was sitting behind a small table in a far corner, a short distance from Professor Marchbanks, who was halfway through testing Draco Malfoy.

"Potter, is it?" said Professor Tofty, consulting his notes and peering over his pince-nez at Harry as he approached. "The famous Potter?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry distinctly saw Malfoy throw a scathing look over at him; the wine glass Malfoy had been levitating fell to the floor and smashed. Harry could not suppress a grin. Professor Tofty smiled back at him encouragingly.

"That's it," he said in his quavery old voice, "no need to be nervous. . . . Now, if I could ask you to take this eggcup and make it do some cartwheels for me . . ."

On the whole Harry thought it went rather well; his Levitation

Charm was certainly much better than Malfoy's had been, though he wished he had not mixed up the incantations for Color-Change and Growth Charms, so that the rat he was supposed to be turning orange swelled shockingly and was the size of a badger before Harry could rectify his mistake. He was glad Hermione had not been in the Hall at the time and neglected to mention it to her afterward. He could tell Ron, though; Ron had caused a dinner plate to mutate into a large mushroom and had no idea how it had happened.

There was no time to relax that night — they went straight to the common room after dinner and submerged themselves in studying for Transfiguration next day. Harry went to bed, his head buzzing with complex spell models and theories.

He forgot the definition of a Switching Spell during his written exam next morning, but thought his practical could have been a lot worse. At least he managed to vanish the whole of his iguana, whereas poor Hannah Abbott lost her head completely at the next table and somehow managed to multiply her ferret into a flock of flamingos, causing the examination to be halted for ten minutes while the birds were captured and carried out of the Hall.

They had their Herbology exam on Wednesday (other than a small bite from a Fanged Geranium, Harry felt he had done reasonably well) and then, on Thursday, Defense Against the Dark Arts. Here, for the first time, Harry felt sure he had passed. He had no problem with any of the written questions and took particular pleasure, during the practical examination, in performing all the counterjinxes and defensive spells right in front of Umbridge, who was watching coolly from near the doors into the entrance hall.

“Oh bravo!” cried Professor Tofty, who was examining Harry again, when Harry demonstrated a perfect boggart banishing spell. “Very good indeed! Well, I think that’s all, Potter . . . unless . . .”

He leaned forward a little.

“I heard, from my dear friend Tiberius Ogden, that you can produce a Patronus? For a bonus point . . . ?”

Harry raised his wand, looked directly at Umbridge, and imagined her being sacked.

“Expecto Patronum!”

The silver stag erupted from the end of his wand and cantered the length of the hall. All of the examiners looked around to watch its progress and when it dissolved into silver mist, Professor Tofty clapped his veined and knotted hands enthusiastically.

“Excellent!” he said. “Very well, Potter, you may go!”

As Harry passed Umbridge beside the door their eyes met. There was a nasty smile playing around her wide, slack mouth, but he did not care. Unless he was very much mistaken (and he was not planning on saying it to anybody, in case he was), he had just achieved an “Outstanding” O.W.L.

On Friday, Harry and Ron had a day off while Hermione sat her Ancient Runes exam, and as they had the whole weekend in front of them, they permitted themselves a break from studying. They stretched and yawned beside the open window, through which warm summer air wafted over them as they played a desultory game of wizard chess. Harry could see Hagrid in the distance, teaching a class on the edge of the forest. He was trying to guess what creatures they were examining — he thought it must be unicorns, because the

boys seemed to be standing back a little — when the portrait hole opened and Hermione clambered in, looking thoroughly bad tempered.

“How were the runes?” said Ron, yawning and stretching.

“I mistranslated ‘ehwaz,’” said Hermione furiously. “It means ‘partnership,’ not ‘defense,’ I mixed it up with ‘eihwaz.’”

“Ah well,” said Ron lazily, “that’s only one mistake, isn’t it, you’ll still get —”

“Oh shut up,” said Hermione angrily, “it could be the one mistake that makes the difference between a pass and a fail. And what’s more, someone’s put another niffler in Umbridge’s office, I don’t know how they got it through that new door, but I just walked past there and Umbridge is shrieking her head off — by the sound of it, it tried to take a chunk out of her leg —”

“Good,” said Harry and Ron together.

“It is *not* good!” said Hermione hotly. “She thinks it’s Hagrid doing it, remember? And we do *not* want Hagrid chucked out!”

“He’s teaching at the moment, she can’t blame him,” said Harry, gesturing out of the window.

“Oh, you’re so *naive* sometimes, Harry, you really think Umbridge will wait for proof?” said Hermione, who seemed determined to be in a towering temper, and she swept off toward the girls’ dormitories, banging the door behind her.

“Such a lovely, sweet-tempered girl,” said Ron, very quietly, prodding his queen forward so that she could begin beating up one of Harry’s knights.

Hermione’s bad mood persisted for most of the weekend, though

Harry and Ron found it quite easy to ignore as they spent most of Saturday and Sunday studying for Potions on Monday, the exam to which Harry was looking forward least and which he was sure would be the one that would be the downfall of his ambitions to become an Auror. Sure enough, he found the written exam difficult, though he thought he might have got full marks on the question about Polyjuice Potion. He could describe its effects extremely accurately, having taken it illegally in his second year.

The afternoon practical was not as dreadful as he had expected it to be. With Snape absent from the proceedings he found that he was much more relaxed than he usually was while making potions. Neville, who was sitting very near Harry, also looked happier than Harry had ever seen him during a Potions class. When Professor Marchbanks said, "Step away from your cauldrons, please, the examination is over," Harry corked his sample flask feeling that he might not have achieved a good grade but that he had, with luck, avoided a fail.

"Only four exams left," said Parvati Patil wearily as they headed back to Gryffindor common room.

"Only!" said Hermione snappishly. "*I've got Arithmancy and it's probably the toughest subject there is!*"

Nobody was foolish enough to snap back, so she was unable to vent her spleen on any of them and was reduced to telling off some first years for giggling too loudly in the common room.

Harry was determined to perform well in Tuesday's Care of Magical Creatures exam so as not to let Hagrid down. The practical examination took place in the afternoon on the lawn on the edge of the

Forbidden Forest, where students were required to correctly identify the knarl hidden among a dozen hedgehogs (the trick was to offer them all milk in turn: knarls, highly suspicious creatures whose quills had many magical properties, generally went berserk at what they saw as an attempt to poison them); then demonstrate correct handling of a bowtruckle, feed and clean a fire-crab without sustaining serious burns, and choose, from a wide selection of food, the diet they would give a sick unicorn.

Harry could see Hagrid watching anxiously out of his cabin window. When Harry's examiner, a plump little witch this time, smiled at him and told him he could leave, Harry gave Hagrid a fleeting thumbs-up before heading back up to the castle.

The Astronomy theory exam on Wednesday morning went well enough; Harry was not convinced he had got the names of all of Jupiter's moons right, but was at least confident that none of them was inhabited by mice. They had to wait until evening for their practical Astronomy; the afternoon was devoted instead to Divination.

Even by Harry's low standards in Divination, the exam went very badly. He might as well have tried to see moving pictures in the desktop as in the stubbornly blank crystal ball; he lost his head completely during tea-leaf reading, saying it looked to him as though Professor Marchbanks would shortly be meeting a round, dark, soggy stranger, and rounded off the whole fiasco by mixing up the life and head lines on her palm and informing her that she ought to have died the previous Tuesday.

"Well, we were always going to fail that one," said Ron gloomily.

as they ascended the marble staircase. He had just made Harry feel rather better by telling him how he told the examiner in detail about the ugly man with a wart on his nose in his crystal ball, only to look up and realize he had been describing his examiner's reflection.

"We shouldn't have taken the stupid subject in the first place," said Harry.

"Still, at least we can give it up now."

"Yeah," said Harry. "No more pretending we care what happens when Jupiter and Uranus get too friendly . . ."

"And from now on, I don't care if my tea leaves spell *die, Ron, die* — I'm just chucking them in the bin where they belong."

Harry laughed just as Hermione came running up behind them. He stopped laughing at once, in case it annoyed her.

"Well, I think I've done all right in Arithmancy," she said, and Harry and Ron both sighed with relief. "Just time for a quick look over our star charts before dinner, then . . ."

When they reached the top of the Astronomy Tower at eleven o'clock they found a perfect night for stargazing, cloudless and still. The grounds were bathed in silvery moonlight, and there was a slight chill in the air. Each of them set up his or her telescope and, when Professor Marchbanks gave the word, proceeded to fill in the blank star chart he or she had been given.

Professors Marchbanks and Tofty strolled among them, watching as they entered the precise positions of the stars and planets they were observing. All was quiet except for the rustle of parchment, the occasional creak of a telescope as it was adjusted on its stand, and the scribbling of many quills. Half an hour passed, then an hour; the

little squares of reflected gold light flickering on the ground below started to vanish as lights in the castle windows were extinguished.

As Harry completed the constellation Orion on his chart, however, the front doors of the castle opened directly below the parapet where he was standing, so that light spilled down the stone steps a little way across the lawn. Harry glanced down as he made a slight adjustment to the position of his telescope and saw five or six elongated shadows moving over the brightly lit grass before the doors swung shut and the lawn became a sea of darkness once more.

Harry put his eye back to his telescope and refocused it, now examining Venus. He looked down at his chart to enter the planet there, but something distracted him. Pausing with his quill suspended over the parchment, he squinted down into the shadowy grounds and saw half a dozen figures walking over the lawn. If they had not been moving, and the moonlight had not been gilding the tops of their heads, they would have been indistinguishable from the dark ground on which they stood. Even at this distance, Harry had a funny feeling that he recognized the walk of the squattest among them, who seemed to be leading the group.

He could not think why Umbridge would be taking a stroll outside past midnight, much less accompanied by five others. Then somebody coughed behind him, and he remembered that he was halfway through an exam. He had quite forgotten Venus's position — jamming his eye to his telescope, he found it again and was again on the point of entering it on his chart when, alert for any odd sound, he heard a distant knock that echoed through the deserted grounds, followed immediately by the muffled barking of a large dog.

He looked up, his heart hammering. There were lights on in Hagrid's windows and the people he had observed crossing the lawn were now silhouetted against them. The door opened and he distinctly saw six tiny but sharply defined figures walk over the threshold. The door closed again and there was silence.

Harry felt very uneasy. He glanced around to see whether Ron or Hermione had noticed what he had, but Professor Marchbanks came walking behind him at that moment, and not wanting to appear as though he was sneaking looks at anyone else's work, he hastily bent over his star chart and pretended to be adding notes to it while really peering over the top of the parapet toward Hagrid's cabin. Figures were now moving across the cabin windows, temporarily blocking the light.

He could feel Professor Marchbanks's eyes on the back of his neck and pressed his eye again to his telescope, staring up at the moon though he had marked its position an hour ago, but as Professor Marchbanks moved on he heard a roar from the distant cabin that echoed through the darkness right to the top of the Astronomy Tower. Several of the people around Harry ducked out from behind their telescopes and peered instead in the direction of Hagrid's cabin.

Professor Tofty gave another dry little cough.

"Try and concentrate, now, boys and girls," he said softly.

Most people returned to their telescopes. Harry looked to his left. Hermione was gazing transfixed at Hagrid's.

"Ahem — twenty minutes to go," said Professor Tofty.

Hermione jumped and returned at once to her star chart. Harry looked down at his own and noticed that he had mislabelled Venus as

Mars. He bent to correct it.

There was a loud *BANG* from the grounds. Several people said "Ouch!" as they poked themselves in the face with the ends of their telescopes, hastening to see what was going on below.

Hagrid's door had burst open and by the light flooding out of the cabin they saw him quite clearly, a massive figure roaring and brandishing his fists, surrounded by six people, all of whom, judging by the tiny threads of red light they were casting in his direction, seemed to be attempting to Stun him.

"No!" cried Hermione.

"My dear!" said Professor Tofty in a scandalized voice. "This is an examination!"

But nobody was paying the slightest attention to their star charts anymore. Jets of red light were still flying beside Hagrid's cabin, yet somehow they seemed to be bouncing off him. He was still upright and still, as far as Harry could see, fighting. Cries and yells echoed across the grounds; a man yelled, "Be reasonable, Hagrid!" and Hagrid roared, "Reasonable be damned, yeh won' take me like this, Dawlish!"

Harry could see the tiny outline of Fang, attempting to defend Hagrid, leaping at the wizards surrounding him until a Stunning Spell caught him and he fell to the ground. Hagrid gave a howl of fury, lifted the culprit bodily from the ground, and threw him. The man flew what looked like ten feet and did not get up again. Hermione gasped, both hands over her mouth. Harry looked around at Ron and saw that he too was looking scared. None of them had ever seen Hagrid in a real temper before. . . .

“Look!” squealed Parvati, who was leaning over the parapet and pointing to the foot of the castle where the front doors seemed to have opened again; more light had spilled out onto the dark lawn and a single long black shadow was now rippling across the lawn.

“Now, really!” said Professor Tofty anxiously. “Only sixteen minutes left, you know!”

But nobody paid him the slightest attention: They were watching the person now sprinting toward the battle beside Hagrid’s cabin.

“How dare you!” the figure shouted as she ran. “How *dare* you!”

“It’s McGonagall!” whispered Hermione.

“Leave him alone! *Alone*, I say!” said Professor McGonagall’s voice through the darkness. “On what grounds are you attacking him? He has done nothing, nothing to warrant such —”

Hermione, Parvati, and Lavender all screamed. No fewer than four Stunners had shot from the figures around the cabin toward Professor McGonagall. Halfway between cabin and castle the red beams collided with her. For a moment she looked luminous, illuminated by an eerie red glow, then was lifted right off her feet, landed hard on her back, and moved no more.

“Galloping gargoyles!” shouted Professor Tofty, who seemed to have forgotten the exam completely. “Not so much as a warning! Outrageous behavior!”

“COWARDS!” bellowed Hagrid, his voice carrying clearly to the top of the tower, and several lights flickered back on inside the castle. “RUDDY COWARDS! HAVE SOME O’ THAT — AN’ THAT —”

“Oh my —” gasped Hermione.

Hagrid took two massive swipes at his closest attackers; judging by their immediate collapse, they had been knocked cold. Harry saw him double over and thought for a moment that he had finally been overcome by a spell, but on the contrary, next moment Hagrid was standing again with what appeared to be a sack on his back — then Harry realized that Fang's limp body was draped around his shoulders.

“Get him, get him!” screamed Umbridge, but her remaining helper seemed highly reluctant to go within reach of Hagrid's fists. Indeed, he was backing away so fast he tripped over one of his unconscious colleagues and fell over. Hagrid had turned and begun to run with Fang still hung around his neck; Umbridge sent one last Stunning Spell after him but it missed; and Hagrid, running full-pelt toward the distant gates, disappeared into the darkness.

There was a long minute's quivering silence, everybody gazing openmouthed into the grounds. Then Professor Tofty's voice said feebly, “Um . . . five minutes to go, everybody . . .”

Though he had only filled in two-thirds of his chart, Harry was desperate for the end of the exam. When it came at last he, Ron, and Hermione forced their telescopes haphazardly back into their holders and dashed back down the spiral staircase. None of the students were going to bed — they were all talking loudly and excitedly at the foot of the stairs about what they had witnessed.

“That evil woman!” gasped Hermione, who seemed to be having difficulty talking due to rage. “Trying to sneak up on Hagrid in the dead of night!”

“She clearly wanted to avoid another scene like Trelawney's,”

said Ernie Macmillan sagely, squeezing over to join them.

“Hagrid did well, didn’t he?” said Ron, who looked more alarmed than impressed. “How come all the spells bounced off him?”

“It’ll be his giant blood,” said Hermione shakily. “It’s very hard to Stun a giant, they’re like trolls, really tough. . . . But poor Professor McGonagall. . . . Four Stunners straight in the chest, and she’s not exactly young, is she?”

“Dreadful, dreadful,” said Ernie, shaking his head pompously. “Well, I’m off to bed . . . ’Night, all . . .”

People around them were drifting away, still talking excitedly about what they had just seen.

“At least they didn’t get to take Hagrid off to Azkaban,” said Ron. “I ’spect he’s gone to join Dumbledore, hasn’t he?”

“I suppose so,” said Hermione, who looked tearful. “Oh, this is awful, I really thought Dumbledore would be back before long, but now we’ve lost Hagrid too . . .”

They traipsed back to the Gryffindor common room to find it full. The commotion out in the grounds had woken several people, who had hastened to rouse their friends. Seamus and Dean, who had arrived ahead of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, were now telling everyone what they had heard from the top of the Astronomy Tower.

“But why sack Hagrid now?” asked Angelina Johnson, shaking her head. “It’s not like Trelawney, he’s been teaching much better than usual this year!”

“Umbridge hates part-humans,” said Hermione bitterly, flopping down into an armchair. “She was always going to try and get Hagrid out.”

“And she thought Hagrid was putting nifflers in her office,” piped up Katie Bell.

“Oh blimey,” said Lee Jordan, covering his mouth. “It’s me’s been putting the nifflers in her office, Fred and George left me a couple, I’ve been levitating them in through her window . . .”

“She’d have sacked him anyway,” said Dean. “He was too close to Dumbledore.”

“That’s true,” said Harry, sinking into an armchair beside Hermione’s.

“I just hope Professor McGonagall’s all right,” said Lavender tearfully.

“They carried her back up to the castle, we watched through the dormitory window,” said Colin Creevey. “She didn’t look very well . . .”

“Madam Pomfrey will sort her out,” said Alicia Spinnet firmly. “She’s never failed yet.”

It was nearly four in the morning before the common room cleared. Harry felt wide awake — the image of Hagrid sprinting away into the dark was haunting him. He was so angry with Umbridge he could not think of a punishment bad enough for her, though Ron’s suggestion of having her fed to a box of starving Blast-Ended Skrewts had its merits. He fell asleep contemplating hideous revenges and arose from bed three hours later feeling distinctly unrested.

Their final exam, History of Magic, was not to take place until that afternoon. Harry would very much have liked to go back to bed after breakfast, but he had been counting on the morning for a spot of last-minute studying, so instead he sat with his head in his hands by the

common room window, trying hard not to doze off as he read through some of the notes stacked three-and-a-half feet high that Hermione had lent him.

The fifth years entered the Great Hall at two o'clock and took their places in front of their overturned examination papers. Harry felt exhausted. He just wanted this to be over so that he could go and sleep. Then tomorrow, he and Ron were going to go down to the Quidditch pitch — he was going to have a fly on Ron's broom and savor their freedom from studying. . . .

"Turn over your papers," said Professor Marchbanks from the front of the Hall, flicking over the giant hourglass. "You may begin. . . ."

Harry stared fixedly at the first question. It was several seconds before it occurred to him that he had not taken in a word of it; there was a wasp buzzing distractingly against one of the high windows. Slowly, tortuously, he began to write an answer.

He was finding it very difficult to remember names and kept confusing dates. He simply skipped question four: *In your opinion, did wand legislation contribute to, or lead to better control of, goblin riots of the eighteenth century?* thinking that he would go back to it if he had time at the end. He had a stab at question five: *How was the Statute of Secrecy breached in 1749 and what measures were introduced to prevent a recurrence?* but had a nagging suspicion that he had missed several important points. He had a feeling vampires had come into the story somewhere. . . .

He looked ahead for a question he could definitely answer and his eyes alighted upon number ten.

Describe the circumstances that led to the Formation of the International Confederation of Wizards and explain why the warlocks of Liechtenstein refused to join.

I know this, Harry thought, though his brain felt torpid and slack. He could visualize a heading, in Hermione's handwriting: *The Formation of the International Confederation of Wizards . . .* He had read these notes only this morning.

He began to write, looking up now and again to check the large hourglass on the desk beside Professor Marchbanks. He was sitting right behind Parvati Patil, whose long dark hair fell below the back of her chair. Once or twice he found himself staring at the tiny golden lights that glistened in it when she moved her head very slightly and had to give his own head a little shake to clear it.

. . . the first Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards was Pierre Bonaccord, but his appointment was contested by the Wizarding community of Liechtenstein, because —

All around Harry quills were scratching on parchment like scurrying, burrowing rats. The sun was very hot on the back of his head. What was it that Bonaccord had done to offend the wizards of Liechtenstein? Harry had a feeling it had something to do with trolls. . . . He gazed blankly at the back of Parvati's head again. If he could only perform Legilimency and open a window in the back of her head and see what it was about trolls that had caused the breach between Pierre Bonaccord and Liechtenstein . . .

Harry closed his eyes and buried his face in his hands, so that the glowing red of his eyelids grew dark and cool. Bonaccord had

wanted to stop troll-hunting and give the trolls rights . . . but Liechtenstein was having problems with a tribe of particularly vicious mountain trolls. . . . That was it. . . .

He opened his eyes; they stung and watered at the sight of the blazing-white parchment. Slowly he wrote two lines about the trolls then read through what he had done so far. It did not seem very informative or detailed, yet he was sure Hermione's notes on the confederation had gone on for pages and pages. . . .

He closed his eyes again, trying to see them, trying to remember. . . . The confederation had met for the first time in France, yes, he had written that already. . . .

Goblins had tried to attend and been ousted. . . . He had written that too. . . .

And nobody from Liechtenstein had wanted to come . . .

Think, he told himself, his face in his hands, while all around him quills scratched out never-ending answers and the sand trickled through the hourglass at the front. . . .

He was walking along the cool, dark corridor to the Department of Mysteries again, walking with a firm and purposeful tread, breaking occasionally into a run, determined to reach his destination at last. . . . The black door swung open for him as usual, and here he was in the circular room with its many doors. . . .

Straight across the stone floor and through the second door . . . patches of dancing light on the walls and floor and that odd mechanical clicking, but no time to explore, he must hurry. . . .

He jogged the last few feet to the third door, which swung open just like the others. . . .

Once again he was in the cathedral-sized room full of shelves and glass spheres. . . . His heart was beating very fast now. . . . He was going to get there this time. . . . When he reached number ninety-seven he turned left and hurried along the aisle between two rows. . . .

But there was a shape on the floor at the very end, a black shape moving upon the floor like a wounded animal. . . . Harry's stomach contracted with fear . . . with excitement. . . .

A voice issued from his own mouth, a high, cold voice empty of any human kindness, "Take it for me. . . . Lift it down, now. . . . I cannot touch it . . . but you can . . ."

The black shape upon the floor shifted a little. Harry saw a long-fingered white hand clutching a wand rise on the end of his own arm . . . heard the high, cold voice say, "*Crucio!*"

The man on the floor let out a scream of pain, attempted to stand but fell back, writhing. Harry was laughing. He raised his wand, the curse lifted, and the figure groaned and became motionless.

"Lord Voldemort is waiting . . ."

Very slowly, his arms trembling, the man on the ground raised his shoulders a few inches and lifted his head. His face was bloodstained and gaunt, twisted in pain yet rigid with defiance. . . .

"You'll have to kill me," whispered Sirius.

"Undoubtedly I shall in the end," said the cold voice. "But you will fetch it for me first, Black. . . . You think you have felt pain thus far? Think again. . . . We have hours ahead of us and nobody to hear you scream . . ."

But somebody screamed as Voldemort lowered his wand again,

somebody yelled and fell sideways off a hot desk onto the cold stone floor. Harry hit the ground and awoke, still yelling, his scar on fire, as the Great Hall erupted all around him.

Uile

Ron is so ekstaties oor sy aandeel in Griffindor se naelskraapse verowering van die Kwiddiekbeker dat hy die volgende dag amper niks uitrig nie. Hy wil net oor die wedstryd praat en Harry en Hermien sukkel om 'n kans te kry om iets oor Ghrop te sê. Nie dat hulle vreeslik hard probeer nie – hulle is nie gretig om Ron op so 'n brutale manier terug aarde toe te bring nie. Dis 'n lekker warm dag en hulle oorreed hom om onder die berkeboom by die meer te gaan sit en leer, waar die kanse ook kleiner is as in die geselskamer dat iemand hulle kan afluister.

Ron is aanvanklik nie baie lus nie. Hy geniet dit terdeë om deur elke Griffindor wat verbystap op die rug geklop te word, om nie te praat van die gereelde uitbarstings van “Weasley is ons Koning” nie. Maar hy stem uiteindelik saam dat 'n bietjie vars lug hom goed sal doen.

Hulle gaan sit in die berkeboom se skaduwee en pak hul boeke uit terwyl Ron, vir wat na die twaalfde keer voel, hulle van sy eerste sukses vertel.

“Wel, ek bedoel, ek het klaar daardie een van Davies laat verbykom en ek't nie waffers gevoel nie, hoor, maar ek weet nie, toe Bradley meteens op my afstorm, toe dink ek – *jy kan dit doen!* En ek het omtrent 'n sekonde om te besluit na watter kant ek moet vlieg, weet julle, want hy't gelyk of hy op my regterhoepel afstuur – my regter, dis nou sy linker – maar ek het 'n snaakse gevoel gehad hy bluf en ek waag die kans en vlieg na links – sy regterkant, bedoel ek – en – wel – julle't gesien wat gebeur het,” eindig hy beskeie, terwyl hy sy hare heeltemal onnodig uit sy oë vee sodat dit windverwaaid moet lyk en rondkyk om te sien of die studente daar naby – 'n klomp skinderende Hoesenproes-derdejaars – hom gehoor het. “En toe Chambers omtrent vyf minute later – wat?” Ron stop in die middel van sy sin toe hy Harry se gesig sien. “Hoekom lag jy?”

“Ek lag nie,” keer Harry gou en kyk na sy Transfigurasienotas terwyl hy sy gesig probeer regtrek. Die waarheid is dat Harry skielik

aan 'n ander Griffindor-Kwiddiekspeler gedink het wat ook sy hare deurmekaar gekrap het onder hierdie boom. "Ek's net bly ons het gewen, dis al."

"Ja," sê Ron met smaak, "ons het gewen. Het julle Chang se gesig gesien toe Ginny die Snip onder haar neus wegraap?"

"Sy't seker weer getjank," sê Harry bitter.

"Wel, ja – maar meer omdat sy kwaad was, hoewel . . ." Ron frons effens. "Het jy nie gesien hoe sy haar besem neersmyt toe sy land nie?"

"Hm – " begin Harry.

"Wel, om eerlik te wees, Ron . . . nee," sê Hermien met 'n swaar sug. Sy sit haar boek neer en kyk verskonend na hom. "Eintlik het ek en Harry net Davies se eerste doel gesien."

Dit lyk of Ron se sorgvuldig deurmekaar gekrapte hare platval van teleurstelling. "Julle het nie gekyk nie?" sê hy floutjies en staar na hulle. "Julle het nie een van die doele wat ek gekeer het, gesien nie?"

"Wel – nee," sê Hermien en steek haar hand versoenend na hom uit. "Maar dis nie omdat ons wou nie – ons moes!"

"O ja?" sê Ron, wie se gesig nou taamlik rooi is. "Wat het gebeur?"

"Dit was Hagrid," sê Harry. "Hy't besluit om vir ons te vertel hoe-kom hy so vol wonde is sedert hy van die reuse af teruggekom het. Hy wou hê ons moes saam met hom na die Woud gaan. Ons kon nie anders nie, jy weet hoe hy is. In elk geval – "

Dit neem vyf minute om die storie te vertel en aan die einde lyk Ron nie meer verontwaardig nie, maar eerder heeltemal ongelowig.

"Hy het een saamgebring en steek hom in die Woud weg?"

"Jip," sê Harry grimmig.

"Nee," sê Ron beslis. "Nee, dit kan nie wees nie."

"Ja, hy het," sê Hermien ferm. "Ghrop is omtrent vyf meter lank, trek graag dennebome van sewe meter uit en ken my as," sy snorklag, "Hemmie."

Ron giggel senuagtig.

"En Hagrid wil hê ons moet . . . ?"

"Vir hom taallesse gee," sê Harry.

"Hy's van sy kop af," sê Ron verdwaas.

"Ja," sê Hermien ergerlik, blaai om en staar na 'n reeks diagramme in *Intermediêre Transfigurasie* van 'n uil wat in 'n operaverkyker verander. "Ja, ek begin dink hy is. Ongelukkig het hy my en Harry laat belowe."

"Wel, julle sal net julle belofte moet verbreek," sê Ron beslis. "Ek bedoel, komaan . . . ons het eksamens en ons is in elk geval net so ver – " hy hou sy duim en wysvinger 'n aks van mekaar, "van ge-

skors word. En wat meer is . . . onthou julle vir Norbert? En vir Aragog? Was dit al ooit 'n goeie idee om met een van Hagrid se monsters te doen te hê?"

"Ek weet. Dis net . . . ons het belowe," sê Hermien in 'n klein stemmetjie.

Ron druk sy hare plat en lyk of hy daaroor nadink.

"Wel," sê hy met 'n sug, "Hagrid is nog nie uitgeskop nie. Dalk hou hy uit tot aan die einde van die kwartaal en dan is dit nie meer nodig om naby daardie Ghrop te kom nie."

Die kasteel se terrein glinster in die sonlig asof dit pas geverf is. Die wolkllose hemel glimlag vir sy eie weerkaatsing in die vonkelende meer. Die satyngroen grasperke rimpel in die wind. Dis Junie, maar vir die vyfdejaars beteken dit net een ding: hul UILE is uiteindelik hier.

Die onderwysers gee nie meer vir hulle huiswerk nie. Lesse word gewy aan hersiening van die onderwerpe wat die onderwysers reken in die eksamen sal voorkom. Die doelgerigte, koorsige atmosfeer dryf amper alles behalwe die UILE uit Harry se kop, hoewel hy soms tydens Towerdrankies wonder of Lupin wel vir Snerp gesê het om weer vir hom Okklumensie-klasse te gee. Indien wel, ignoreer Snerp Lupin se versoek net so deeglik soos wat hy nou vir Harry ignoreer. Dit pas Harry uitstekend. Hy is oorwerk en gespanne genoeg sonder ekstra klasse by Snerp, en tot sy verligting is Hermien te verstrooid om verder aan hom oor Okklumensie te torring. Sy praat dikwels met haarself en het dae laas klere vir die elwe uitgesit.

Sy is nie die enigste een wat eienaardig optree soos die UILE nader kom nie. Ernie Macmillan ontwikkel die irriterende gewoonte om mense oor hul hersiening uit te vra.

"Hoeveel uur doen julle per dag?" vra hy met 'n maniese uitdrukking in sy oë vir Harry en Ron toe hulle in die ry voor die Herbologie-klas staan.

"Ek weet nie," sê Ron, "'n paar."

"Ek doen agt," sê Ernie en stoot sy bors uit. "Agt of nege. Ek doen 'n uur elke oggend voor ontbyt. Agt is my gemiddeld. Ek kan tien oor die naweke doen. Maandag het ek nege en 'n half gedoen. Dinsdag was nie so goed nie – net sewe en 'n kwart. Woensdag het ek –"

Harry is baie bly toe professor Spruit hulle in kweekhuis nr. 3 jaag en Ernie stil word.

Intussen het Draco Malfoy 'n ander metode gevind om paniek te saai.

"Natuurlik is dit nie wat jy weet nie," sê hy hard vir Krabbe en

Goliat net voor Towerdrankies en 'n paar dae voor die begin van die eksamen, "dis wie jy ken. Vader is al jare bevriend met die Beheer-vrou vir Towenaarseksamens – ou Griselda Maarsbank – ons het haar vir ete genooi en alles . . ."

"Dink julle dis waar?" fluister Hermien ontsteld vir Harry en Ron.

"As dit is, is daar niks wat ons daaraan kan doen nie," sê Ron bedruk.

"Ek dink nie dis waar nie," sê Neville sag agter hulle. "My ouma ken vir Griselda Maarsbank en sy't nog nooit oor die Malfoys gepraat nie."

"Hoe is sy, Neville?" vra Hermien dadelik. "Is sy streng?"

"'n Bietjie soos my ouma," sê Neville in 'n onderdrukte stem.

"Dit sal darem seker nie kwaad doen as jy haar ken nie, hè?" sê Ron aanmoedigend.

"O, ek dink nie dit sal in my geval 'n verskil maak nie," sê Neville nog meer miserabel. "Ouma sê altyd vir professor Maarsbank dat ek nie so goed soos my pa is nie . . . wel . . . julle het in Sint Mungo gesien hoe my ma is . . ."

Hy staar na die vloer en Harry, Ron en Hermien kyk na mekaar. Hulle weet nie wat om te sê nie. Dis die eerste keer dat Neville erken dat hy hulle in die towenaarshospitaal raakgeloop het.

Intussen het 'n florerende bedryf in konsentrasiedoeplas, hulpmiddels vir verstandelike soepelheid en wakkerblymiddels onder die vyfde- en sewendejaars ontstaan. Harry en Ron is baie lus om 'n bottel Harspan-breinstimuleerder te koop by Eddie Carmichael, 'n Raweklou-sesdejaar. Eddie sweer dis hoekom hy die vorige jaar nege "Uitstekende" UILE gekry het en bied 'n liter aan vir die karige bedrag van twaalf Galjoene. Ron verseker Harry hy sal die helfte aan hom terugbetaal sodra hy uit Hogwarts is en 'n werk het, maar Hermien konfiskeer die bottel by Eddie en gooi die inhoud in die toilet af voor hulle die koop kan beklink.

"Hermien, ons wou dit koop!" raas Ron.

"Moenie laf wees nie," snou sy. "Julle kan net sowel Harold de Wet se gepoeterde drakeklou koop."

"De Wet het drakeklou?" vra Ron gretig.

"Nie meer nie," sê Hermien. "Ek het dit ook gekonfiskeer. Dié goed werk nie, weet julle!"

"Is ja, drakeklou werk regtig!" sê Ron. "Dis glo ongelooflik. Dit gee jou brein ekstra skop en jy's vir 'n hele paar uur baie skerp. Hermien, gee 'n bietjie hier, toe, dit kan nie kwaad doen nie –"

"Hierdie gemors kan," sê Hermien beslis. "Ek het dit goed bekyk en dis niks anders as gedroogde Doxiemis nie."

Hierdie brokkie inligting maak Harry, en Ron heelwat minder prettig om breinstimulante te gebruik.

Hulle kry hul eksamenroosters en die besonderhede oor die prosedure vir die U1Le tydens hul volgende Transfigurasielas.

"Soos julle kan sien," sê professor McGonagall toe hulle die datums en tye van hul eksamens van die bord afskryf, "is jul U1Le oor die volgende twee weke versprei. Julle skryf die teoretiese vraestelle soggens en die praktiese deel word in die middag gedoen. Die praktiese Sterrekunde-eksamen sal natuurlik in die aand plaasvind.

"Nou, ek moet julle waarsku dat daar baie streng teen kullery opgetree sal word. Al die vraestelle is met teenkonkelpaljasse behandel. Selfantwoordveerpennne word verbied, sowel as Onthouers, Losknoopkulboordjies en Regskryf-ink. Daar is elke jaar minstens een student wat dink hy of sy kan wegkom met bedrog tydens die eksamen. Ek kan net hoop dit sal nie iemand uit Griffindor wees nie. Ons nuwe skoolhoof –" professor McGonagall se gesig vertrek nes tant Petunia s'n wanneer sy 'n vuil kolletjie iewers sien, "– het gevra dat die Hoofde van die Huise die studente waarsku dat kullery baie streng gestraf sal word. Dit natuurlik omdat jul eksamenuitslae op die nuwe skoolhoof se bestuursvermoëns sal reflekteer –" sy sug spytig met wydgesperde neusvleuels, "– maar dis natuurlik geen verskoning om nie jul bes te doen nie. Julle moet aan julle eie toekoms dink."

Hermien se hand skiet in die lug. "Verskoon my, Professor, wanneer kry ons ons uitslae?"

"Julle sal in Julie 'n uil kry," sê professor McGonagall.

"Uitstekend," fluister Dean Thomas hard, "dan hoef ons eers in die vakansie daaroor te worrie."

Harry sien al hoe sit hy oor ses weke in sy slaapkamer in Ligusterlaan en wag op sy U1L-uitslae. Wel, dink hy mistroostig, dan kry ek darem een keer in die vakansie pos.

Hul eerste vraestel, Teorie van Towerspreuke, is vir die Maandagoggend geskeduleer. Harry stem in om die Sondag ná middagete vir Hermien vrae te vra, maar hy is amper onmiddellik spyt. Sy is baie gespanne en gryp die boek aanmekaar uit sy hande om te kyk of sy die antwoord presies reg het, tot sy hom per ongeluk met *Towerprestasies* se skerp kant teen die neus tref.

"Miskien moet jy dit eerder self doen," sê hy ferm toe hy die boek met oë wat traan vir haar teruggee.

Ron is besig om twee jaar se Towerspreuknotas te lees met sy vingers in sy ore gedruk en lippe wat geluidloos beweeg. Septimus Floris lê op die naat van sy rug op die vloer en sê die definisie vir 'n

selfstandige towerspreuk op, terwyl Dean in Die Standaardhandleiding vir Goëlery, Graad 5 kyk of hy reg is. Parvati en Hildegard oefen basiese bewegingstoerwerk en laat hul potlooddose resies jaag om die tafel.

Almal is stil tydens aandete. Harry en Ron sê nie veel nie, maar eet met oorgawe na die dag se harde werk. Hermien sit haar mes en vurk aanhoudend neer en duik onder die tafel in om die een of ander feit of getal in 'n handboek na te slaan. Ron het net vir haar gesê dat sy genoeg moet eet anders sal sy die aand nie goed slaap nie, toe haar vurk uit haar hand gly en kletterend op haar bord val.

"O goeiste," sê sy en staar na die ingangsportaal. "Is dit hulle? Is dit die eksaminators?"

Harry en Ron kyk vinnig om. Hulle sien vir Umbridge en 'n klein groepie stokou hekse en towenaars by die Groot Saal se deure. Harry is bly om te sien dat Umbridge nogal gespanne lyk.

"Sal ons gaan kyk?" vra Ron.

Harry en Hermien knik en hulle stap vinnig na die dubbele deure van die ingangsportaal. Daar verstadig hulle hul pas en stap langsaam en met groot waardigheid deur die ingangsportaal verby die eksaminators. Harry lei af die klein krom heks met die beplooide gesig wat lyk asof sy deur 'n spinnerak geloop het, moet professor Maarsbank wees, want Umbridge spreek haar baie eerbiedig aan. Dit lyk of professor Maarsbank 'n bietjie doof is, want sy antwoord baie hard, hoewel sy en professor Umbridge net 'n tree van mekaar af staan.

"Goed gereis, goed gereis, ons het dit al baie keer gedoen!" sê sy ongeduldig. "Nou ja, ek het nog nie weer van Dompeldorius gehoor nie!" Sy kyk in die voorportaal rond asof sy hoop dat hy skielik uit 'n besemkas gaan spring. "Weet jy glad nie waar hy is nie?"

"Hoegenaamd nie," sê Umbridge en kyk venynig na Harry, Ron en Hermien wat nou aan die onderkant van die trappe rondstaan terwyl Ron maak of hy sy veter vasmaak. "Maar ek is seker die Ministerie vir Towerkuns sal hom binnekort opspoor."

"Ek twyfel," skree die kleine professor Maarsbank, "nie as Dompeldorius nie opgespoor wil word nie! Ek behoort te weet . . . het hom persoonlik vir Transfigurasie en Towerspreuke geëksamineer toe hy sy OTTe geskryf het . . . kon dinge met 'n towerstaf doen wat ek nog nooit tevore gesien het nie."

"Ja . . . wel . . ." sê professor Umbridge terwyl Harry, Ron en Hermien so stadig moontlik met die marmertappe boontoe stap, "kom ek neem julle na die personeelkamer. Julle is seker lus vir 'n koppie tee."

Dis 'n ongemaklike soort aand. Almal probeer om vir oulaas iets te leer, maar niemand kry juis iets reg nie. Harry gaan vroeg bed toe, maar dit voel of hy ure lank wakker lê. Hy onthou sy beroepsleidingssessie en McGonagall se verwoede verklaring dat sy hom sal help om 'n Auror te word al is dit die laaste ding wat sy doen. Noudat die eksamen op hande is, wens hy hy het 'n beroep genoem wat meer haalbaar is. Hy weet hy is nie die enigste een wat wakker lê nie, maar almal is doodstil. Uiteindelik raak hulle een vir een aan die slaap.

Die volgende oggend tydens ontbyt sê nie een van die vyfdejaars veel nie. Parvati oefen binnensmonds towerspreuke sodat die soutpot rittel, Hermien herlees *Towerprestasies* teen so 'n dollie vaart dat haar oë oormekaar kyk en Neville laat val aanmekaar sy mes en vurk en gooi die marmelade om.

Ná ontbyt gaan die ander studente na hul klasse, terwyl die vyfde- en sewendejaars in die ingangsportaal rondmaal. Teen half-tien word hulle klas vir klas na die Groot Saal geroep. Dit lyk net soos Harry in die Peinssif gesien het toe sy pa, Sirius, en Snerp hul Uille geskryf het. Die vier huistafels is weggeneem en vervang deur 'n klein tafeltjie vir elke student. Almal wys na die personeeltafel voor in die Saal, waar professor McGonagall staan en wag. Toe almal gaan sit het en stil is, sê sy: "Julle mag begin," en draai 'n tamaai uurglas op die tafel langs haar om, waarop daar ook ekstra veerpenne, inkbottels en rolle perkament is.

Harry draai sy vraestel om en sy hart begin vinnig klop. Drie rye en vier sitplekke voor hom is Hermien reeds aan die skryf. Hy kyk na die eerste vraag: a) *Gee die towerspreuk vir en b) beskryf die towerstafbewegings wat nodig is om voorwerpe te laat vlieg.*

Harry sien vir 'n vlietende oomblik hoe 'n knuppel hoog deur die lug trek en 'n trol se dik kopbeen met 'n harde slag tref. Hy glimlag effens toe hy oor sy perkament buig en begin skryf.

"Wel, dit was toe nie so erg nie, was dit?" sê Hermien angstig twee uur later in die ingangsportaal. Sy het haar vraestel in haar hand. "Ek's bevrees ek het nie te goed gevaar met die Opkickerspreuke nie, daar was te min tyd. Het julle die teenspreuk vir hik ook ingesit? Ek was nie seker of ek moes nie, ek't gevoel dis dalk te veel. En by vraag 23 –"

"Hermien," sê Ron kwaai, "ons het reeds hieroor gepraat. . . ons gaan nie weer agterna deur elke vraestel nie, dis erg genoeg om dit te skryf."

Die vyfdejaars eet middagete saam met die res van die skool (die

vier huistafels het weer verskyn) en gaan daarna na 'n klein vertrek langs die Groot Saal waar hulle wag om vir hul praktiese eksamen geroep te word. Terwyl groepies studente in alfabetiese volgorde uitgeroep word, prewel die res spreuke, oefen towerstafbewegings en steek mekaar nou en dan per ongeluk in die rug of die oog.

Hermien se naam word geroep en sy stap uit saam met Antonie Goldstein, Gerhardus Goliath en Daphne Greengrass. Die studente wat reeds getoets is, kom nie weer terug nie, dus weet Harry en Ron nie hoe sy gevaar het nie.

"Sy sal oukei wees," sê Ron. "Onthou, sy't vir een van haar Tower-spreuktoetse 112 persent gekry."

Tien minute later roep professor Flickerpitt: "Parkinson, Pansy – Patel, Padma – Patel, Parvati – Potter, Harry."

"Sterkte," sê Ron sag. Harry hou sy towerstaf so styf vas toe hy na die Groot Saal stap dat sy hand bewe.

"Professor Tofty is beskikbaar, Potter," piep professor Flickerpitt wat net binne die deur staan. Hy wys na die oudste eksaminator met die kaalste kop in 'n hoek by 'n tafeltjie langs professor Maarsbank wat met Draco Malfoy besig is.

"Potter, nè?" sê professor Tofty. Hy kyk na sy notas en loer oor sy knypbriljetjie na Harry. "Die beroemde Potter?"

Harry sien uit die hoek van sy oog dat Malfoy smalend na hom kyk. Die wynglas wat Malfoy in die lug laat leviteer, val stukkend op die vloer. Harry kan nie help om te glimlag nie. Professor Tofty glimlag bemoedigend vir hom.

"Dis mooi," sê hy in 'n bewerige oumanstem, "nie nodig om gespanne te wees nie. Nou, kan ek jou vra om hierdie eierkelkie wawiele te laat doen?"

Harry dink ná die tyd dat dit nogal goed gegaan het. Sy Levitasiespreuk was beslis beter as Malfoy s'n. Hy wens net hy het nie die spreuke vir kleurveranderings en groei verwar sodat die rot wat hy oranje moes maak so groot soos 'n ratel was voor hy hom kon regtoor nie. Hy is bly Hermien was nie in die Saal nie en vertel ook niks vir haar nie. Hy sê wel vir Ron, wat op sy beurt 'n bord in 'n groot sampioen verander het en glad nie weet hoe hy dit reggekry het nie.

Daardie aand is daar nie tyd om te ontspan nie. Ná ete gaan hulle dadelik na die geselskamer en begin om Transfigurasie te hersien. Toe Harry gaan slaap, gons sy kop van al die ingewikkelde spreuke en teorie.

Hy vergeet die definisie vir 'n Ruilpaljas die volgende oggend tydens die geskrewe eksamen, maar voel dat die prakties baie erger

kon gewees het. Hy't darem sy hele likkewaan laat verdwyn, terwyl die arme Hanna Abbott by die tafel langsaan kop verloor het en haar wesel in 'n swerm flaminke verander het. Die eksamen moes vir tien minute gestaak word sodat die voëls gevang en uit die Saal geneem kon word.

Woensdag is dit Herbologie en afgesien van 'n getande malva wat hom gebyt het, voel Harry dat hy nogal goed gevaar het. En toe is dit Donderdag en Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste. Harry is vir die eerste keer seker dat hy deur sal wees. Hy ondervind geen probleme met die geskrewe gedeelte nie en geniet die praktiese eksamen terdê, veral om die teenvloeke en verdedigingspreuke voor Umbridge te doen wat hom koel van die deure af dophou.

"A, bravo!" roep professor Tofty, wat weer vir Harry eksamineer, uit toe Harry 'n perfekte Boggartverbanspreuk doen. "Inderdaad baie goed! Wel, ek dink dis al, Potter . . . tensy . . ."

Hy leun effens vorentoe.

"Ek het by my liewe vriend Tiberius Ogden gehoor dat jy 'n Patronus kan doen? Vir 'n bonuspunt . . .?"

Harry lig weer sy towerstaf, kyk stip na Umbridge en verbeel hom hoe sy die trekpas kry

"Expecto patronum!"

Sy silwer takbok spring uit die punt van sy towerstaf en galop deur die Saal. Al die eksaminators volg dit met hul oë en toe dit in silwer mis verdwyn, klap professor Tofty sy knopperige, beaarde hande entoesiasies.

"Uitstekend!" sê hy. "Baie goed, Potter, jy mag gaan!"

Toe Harry verby Umbridge stap, ontmoet hulle oë. Daar speel 'n nare glimlaggie om haar breë slap mond, maar dit skeel hom nie. Tensy hy 'n baie groot fout maak, het hy so pas sy eerste "Uitstekende" UIL gekry.

Die Vrydag het Harry en Ron af, terwyl Hermien haar eksamen in Antieke Runes doen. Aangesien die naweek voorlê, gun hulle hulself 'n blaaskans. Hulle strek en gaap voor die oop venster waardeur 'n warm somerwindjie waai terwyl hulle towenaarskaak speel. Harry sien vir Hagrid in die verte waar hy besig is om aan die rand van die Woud klas te gee. Harry probeer raai met watter kreature die studente werk en besluit dit moet eenhorings wees, aangesien die seuns nogal lugtig lyk. Net toe gaan die portretopening oop en Hermien klim deur. Sy lyk besonder omgekrap.

"Hoe was die Runes?" vra Ron, gapend.

"Ek het ehwaz verkeerd vertaal," sê Hermien vies. "Dit beteken vennootskap, nie verdediging nie. Ek het dit met eihwaz verwar."

“Ag wel,” sê Ron lomerig, “dis net een ou foutjie, jy sal nog steeds –”

“Hou tog net jou snater!” sê Hermien ergerlik. “Dit kan daardie een ou foutjie wees wat die verskil maak tussen deurkom en druip. En wat meer is, iemand het nog ’n niffler in Umbridge se kantoor gesit. Ek weet nie hoe dit by die nuwe deur ingekom het nie, maar toe ek nou net daar verbystap, was Umbridge besig om soos ’n mal ding te skree. Dit klink of die ding ’n gat in haar been probeer byt het –”

“Mooi so,” sê Harry en Ron gelyk.

“Dis nie mooi nie!” skree Hermien. “Sy dink dis Hagrid, onthou? En ons wil nie hê Hagrid moet uitgeskop word nie.”

“Hy gee op die oomblik klas. Sy kan nie die skuld op hom pak nie,” sê Harry en wys na die venster.

“Harry, jy kan soms so naïef wees. Dink jy regtig Umbridge stel in bewyse belang?” Dit lyk of Hermien vas van plan is om kwaad te bly. Sy swiep na die meisies se slaapsale en gooi die deur agter haar toe.

“So ’n oulike, saggeaarde ou meisietjie,” sê Ron en stoot sy koningin vorentoe om met Harry se ridder af te reken.

Hermien is die res van die naweek in ’n slegte bui. Dis nie vir Harry en Ron moeilik om haar te ignoreer nie, aangesien hulle die Saterdag en Sondag Towerdrankies moet hersien. Dis die vraestel waarteen Harry die meeste opsien. Hy vermoed ook dis die een wat sy ambisie om ’n Auror te word kan kortwiek. Die geskrewe vraestel is baie moeilik, hoewel hy dalk volpunte kan kry vir die vraag oor Polisouspaljas. Hy kon die uitwerking daarvan met groot akkuraatheid beskryf, aangesien hy dit onwettig in sy tweede jaar gedrink het.

Die middag se prakties is nie so aaklig soos hy verwag het nie. Sonder Snerp is hy nie so gespanne as gewoonlik wanneer hy towerdrankies moet maak nie. Neville, wat naby Harry sit, lyk ook rustiger as wat Harry hom nog ooit tydens ’n Towerdrankie-les gesien het. Toe professor Maarsbank sê: “Staan weg van julle heksketels, asseblief, die eksamen is verby,” druk Harry ’n kurk in sy fles met die gevoel dat hy dalk nie só ’n goeie punt sal kry nie, maar ook nie sal druip nie.

“Nog net vier eksamens,” sê Parvati Patel toe hulle na die Grifindor-geleeskamer stap.

“Net!” kap Hermien teë. “Ek moet nog Rekenmatiek doen en dis die heel moeilikste vak!”

Niemand is dom genoeg om met haar te stry nie. Toe sy haar

humeur op niemand kan uithaal nie, raas sy maar met 'n paar cerstejaars wat volgens haar te hard in die geselskamer lag.

Harry is vasberade om goed te doen in Dinsdag se eksamen vir Versorging van Magiese Kreature. Hy wil nie vir Hagrid in die steek laat nie. Die praktiese eksamen vind die middag op die grasperk aan die rand van die Verbode Woud plaas. Die studente moet eers die knarl wat tussen 'n dosyn krimpvarkies wegkruip korrek uitken. Die geheim is om vir hulle melk aan te bied. Knarle is baie agterdogtige diere en hul penne het talle magiese eienskappe. Hulle raak baie omgekrap as hulle vermoed dat iemand hulle probeer vergiftig. Daarna moet hulle wys hoe om 'n takkruiper korrek te hanteer, 'n vuurkrap kosgee en skoonmaak sonder om ernstige brandwonde op te doen, en uit 'n groot verskeidenheid kos die regte dieet vir 'n siek eenhoring saamstel.

Harry sien dat Hagrid hulle angstig deur sy hut se venster dophou. Toe Harry se eksaminator, hierdie keer 'n mollige heks, vir hom glimlag en sê hy mag gaan, wys Harry sy duim vir Hagrid voor hy terugstap kasteel toe.

Woensdagoggend se Sterrekunde-vraestel loop goed af. Harry is nie seker dat hy die name van al Jupiter se mane reg het nie, maar hy was minstens seker dat daar nie muise woon nie. Omdat hulle tot die aand moet wag vir praktiese Sterrekunde, wy hulle die middag aan Waarsêery.

Selfs gemeet aan Harry se lae standarde verloop die Waarsêery-eksamen baie sleg. Hy kan net sowel probeer om bewegende prente op die tafel voor hom te sien as in die leë kristalbal. Hy verloor heeltemal kop toe hulle teeblare moet lees en voorspel dat professor Maarsbank binnekort 'n ronde, donker, klam vreemdeling gaan ontmoet. Hy rond die fiasko af deur die lewenslyn en noodlotslyn op haar handpalm te verwar en vir haar te sê dat sy al die vorige Dinsdag dood moes gewees het.

“Wel, ons het altyd geweet ons gaan dit sak,” sê Ron nors toe hulle met die marmertrappe opstap. Harry voel effens beter toe Ron hom vertel hoe hy sy eksaminator gewaarsku het teen 'n lelike man met 'n vrat op sy neus wat hy in die kristalbal gesien het voor hy besef het dis die eksaminator se weerkaatsing.

“Ons moes nooit hierdie simpel vak geneem het nie,” sê Harry.

“Wel, ons kan nou ophou.”

Dit laat Harry 'n bietjie beter voel. “Dink net, ons hoef nie meer te maak of ons omgee wat sal gebeur as Jupiter en Uranus te veel van mekaar hou nie.”

“En van nou af traak dit my nie as my teeblare *vrek*, Ron, *vrek* spel nie – ek smyt hulle net in die drom waar hulle hoort.”

Harry lag nog toe Hermien aangehardloop kom. Hy bly dadelik stil ingeval dit haar irriteer.

“Wel, ek dink ek het nogal goed in Rekenmatiek gedoen,” sê sy en Harry en Ron sug verlig. “Daar’s net genoeg tyd om voor aandete na ons sterkaarte te kyk.”

Toe hulle teen elfuur bo in die Sterrekunde-toring kom, is dit wolkloos en stil, ’n volmaakte aand vir sterre kyk. Die terrein is gebaai in silwer maanlig en die lug is koel. Hulle stel hul teleskope op en toe professor Maarsbank die opdrag gee, begin hulle om die sterkaarte in te vul.

Professor Maarsbank en professor Tofty stap tussen hulle deur terwyl hulle die presiese posisies van die sterre en die planeete aanteken. Alles is stil, behalwe die geritsel van perkament, die gekraak van ’n teleskoop as dit verstel word en die gekrap van hul veerpenne. ’n Halfuur is verby, toe ’n uur. Die blokkies goue lig wat op die terrein flikker, begin doodgaan soos die ligte in die kasteel uitgedoof word.

Net toe Harry die konstellasie van Orion op sy kaart voltooi het, gaan die kasteel se voordeure oop, reg onder die leunmuurtjie waarteen hy staan. Lig val oor die kliptrappe en oor ’n gedeelte van die grasperk. Harry loer ondertoe terwyl hy sy teleskoop se posisie effens verander. Hy sien vyf of ses lang skaduwees oor die verligte grasperk val voor die deure toeswaai en die grasperk weer ’n see van duisternis is.

Harry kyk weer deur die teleskoop en fokus om Venus te bestudeer. Toe hy afkyk om die planeet op sy sterkaart aan te teken, trek iets sy aandag. Sy veerpen huiwer bo die perkament en hy loer na die skaduagtige terrein. ’n Halfdosyn figure loop oor die grasperk. As hulle nie beweeg het en die maan op hul koppe geskyn het nie, sou hy hulle nie van die donker terrein kon onderskei nie. Selfs op hierdie afstand dink Harry hy weet wie die gesette figuur is wat voor stap.

Hy kan nie dink waarom Umbridge ná middernag in die geselskap van vyf ander mense buite rondloop nie. Dan hoës iemand agter hom en hy onthou dat hy met ’n eksamen besig is. Hy het Venus se posisie vergeet en druk weer sy oog teen die teleskoop. Hy is op die punt om Venus op sy kaart aan te teken toe hy ’n geklop in die verte hoor, gevolg deur die dowwe geblaf van ’n hond.

Sy hart klop wild toe hy opkyk. Daar skyn lig uit Hagrid se vensters en die mense wat hy oor die grasperk sien stap het, is daarteen afgeteken. Die deur gaan oop en hy sien hoe ses figure oor die drumpel tree. Die deur gaan toe en alles word stil.

Harry is baie bekommerd. Hy loer rond om te sien of Ron en

Hermien iets opgelet het, maar sien dat professor Maarsbank nader stap. Hy wil nie lyk of hy probeer afloer nie en buk haastig oor sy sterkaart om te maak of hy iets neerskryf terwyl hy skelm na Hagrid se hut loer. Net toe beweeg figure voor die venster verby en sny die lig af.

Harry voel professor Maarsbank se blik teen sy agterkop en druk sy oog weer teen sy teleskoop. Hy staar na die maan, hoewel hy die posisie daarvan 'n uur gelede aangeteken het, maar net toe professor Maarsbank begin wegstap, weerklink 'n gebrul uit die hut. Dit weergalm deur die duisternis tot bo by die Sterrekunde-toring. Verskeie mense kom agter hulle teleskope uit om na Hagrid se hut te staar.

Professor Tufty gee weer 'n droë kuggie.

"Probeer konsentreer, seuns en dogters," sê hy sag.

Die meeste studente raak weer met hul teleskope doenig. Harry loer na links. Hermien staar stip na Hagrid se hut.

"Ahem – nog twintig minute," sê professor Tufty.

Hermien skrik en spring dadelik weer aan die werk. Harry kyk na sy sterkaart en sien dat hy Venus verkeerdelik Mars genoem het. Hy buk oor om dit reg te maak.

'n Harde BOEM weerklink oor die terrein. 'n Paar studente skree "Eina!" toe hulle hul met die teleskoop in die oog steek uit pure haas om te sien wat aangaan.

Hagrid se deur het oopgebars en in die lig wat uit die hut stroom, kan hulle hom duidelik sien staan: 'n massiewe brullende figuur met swaaiende vuiste omring deur ses mense wat, te oordeel na die rooi strale wat hulle op hom afstuur, almal probeer om hom te Bedwelm.

"Neel!" skree Hermien.

"My kind," sê professor Tufty geskok. "Dis 'n eksamen!"

Maar niemand gee meer enige aandag aan hul sterkaarte nie. Rooi ligstrale vlieg na Hagrid, maar dit lyk of dit van hom af wegbons. Hy staan nog steeds regop en dit lyk vir Harry of hy nog steeds veg. Krete en uitroepe weerklink oor die terrein en 'n manstem skree. "Wees tog redelik, Hagrid!"

"Redelik se voet!" brul Hagrid. "Julle sal my nie só vang nie, Davel!"

Harry sien hoe Tande vir Hagrid probeer beskerm deur die towenaars te bespring wat hom omsingel – tot 'n Bedwelmspreuk hom tref en teen die grond slinger. Hagrid skree verwoed, lig die skuldige oor sy kop en smyt hom deur die lug. Die man trek omtrent drie meter ver en staan nie weer op nie. Hermien snak na asem met haar hande voor haar mond. Harry kyk na Ron en sien dat hy verskrik lyk. Hulle het nog nooit 'n werklik ontstoke Hagrid gesien nie.

“Kyk!” skree Parvati wat oor die leunmuurtjie hang. Sy wys na die voet van die kasteel waar die voordeure weer oopgeswaai het. Lig spoel oor die donker grasperk en ’n enkele lang swart skaduwee beweeg oor die grasperk.

“Nee, regtig,” sê professor Tufty benoud, “nog net sestiende minute, mense!”

Maar niemand luister na hom nie. Alle oë is op die persoon wat nou na Hagrid se hut nêl.

“Hoe durf jy!” skree die figuur. “Hoe durf jy?”

“Dis McGonagall!” fluister Hermien.

“Los hom uit! Los hom, sê ek!” Professor McGonagall se stem sny deur die donkerte. “Watter reg het julle om hom aan te val? Hy het niks gedoen om dit te regverdig –”

Hermien, Parvati en Hildegard skree. Die figure om die hut stuur nie minder as vier Bedwelmers op professor McGonagall af nie. Die rooi strale tref haar halfpad tussen die kasteel en die hut. Vir ’n oomblik is sy helder verlig, dan trek sy deur die lug, val hard op haar rug en bly bewegingloos lê.

“Galoppende draakkoppel!” skree professor Tufty en dit lyk of hy nou ook vergeet het dis ’n eksamen. “Nie eens ’n waarskuwing nie! Wat ’n skande!”

“LAFKAARDS!” bulder Hagrid en sy stem weerklink oor die terrein. Verskeie ligte in die kasteel gaan aan. “VERBRANDE LAFKAARDS! VAT SO – EN SO –”

“O liewe –” snak Hermien.

Hagrid tref die twee aanvallers naaste aan hom met sy vuiste. Hulle sak inmekaar, duidelik katswink. Harry sien hoe Hagrid dubbel vou en wonder of hy oplaas deur ’n paljas getref is. Maar nee, Hagrid kom steierend orent met iets soos ’n sak op sy rug. Dan besef Harry dis Tande se slap liggaam wat oor Hagrid se skouers hang.

“Kry hom, kry hom!” skree Umbridge, maar haar enigste oorblywende assistent is duidelik nie gretig om binne bereik van Hagrid se vuiste te kom nie. Hy retireer so vinnig dat hy oor ’n bewustelose kollega struikel en neerslaan. Hagrid draai om en hardloop weg met Tande om sy nek. Umbridge rig ’n laaste Bedwelmspreuk op hom, maar dis mis en Hagrid verdwyn deur die hekke in die donker.

Vir ’n paar minute is almal doodstil en staar oopmond na die terrein. Dan sê professor Tufty floutjies: “Um... nog vyf minute, almal.”

Hoewel hy net twee derdes van sy sterkaart voltooi het, kan Harry nie wag dat die eksamen verby moet wees nie. Toe dit eindelijk klaar is, steek hy, Ron en Hermien hul teleskope haastig in die

houers en hardloop met die wenteltrap af ondertoe. Nie een van die studente gaan nou slaap nie. Almal praat hard en opgewonde aan die voet van die trappe oor wat hulle gesien het.

"Die ou koei!" snou Hermien, wat amper nie kan praat van woede nie. "Om Hagrid in die middel van die nag te bekruipt."

"Sy was nie lus vir 'n herhaling van wat met Trelawney gebeur het nie," sê Ernie Macmillan filosofies terwyl hy deur die skare na hulle toe beur.

"Hagrid was fantasties, hè?" sê Ron, wat meer geskok as beïndruk lyk. "Hoekom het al die paljasse net van hom af weggebons?"

"Dis sy reusbloed," sê Hermien, bewerig. "Dis bitter moeilik om 'n reus te Bedwelm, hulle is baie soos trolle, baie taai. . . Maar die arme professor McGonagall. . . vier Bedwelmers teen die bors en sy's nie meer jonk nie!"

"Skokkend, skokkend," sê Ernie hoogdrawend en skud sy kop. "Wel, ek gaan bed toe. Goeienag."

Die studente om hulle begin geselsend wegraak. Almal is duidelik nog ontsteld oor wat gebeur het.

"Ten minste het hulle nie vir Hagrid na Azkaban geneem nie," sê Ron. "Hy sal seker na Dompeldorius toe gaan, of hoe?"

"Ek sou so dink." Hermien lyk of sy wil huil. "O, dis aaklig. Ek het regtig gedink Dompeldorius sal gou terugkom en nou't ons vir Hagrid ook verloor."

Hulle stap terug na die Griffindor-geselskamer, wat vol mense is. Die kabaal op die terrein het baie studente laat wakker word, wat op hulle beurt hul vriende wakker gemaak het. Septimus en Dean, wat voor Harry, Ron en Hermien daar aangekom het, is besig om vir almal te vertel wat hulle van die Sterrekunde-toring af gesien het.

"Maar hoekom nou vir Hagrid laat loop?" Angelina Johnson skud haar kop. "Hy's nie 'n geval soos Trelawney nie en hy was vanjaar baie beter as gewoonlik!"

"Umbridge haat halfmense," sê Hermien bitter. Sy val in 'n stoel neer. "Sy't Hagrid die hele tyd probeer uitwerk."

"En sy't gedink Hagrid het die niffers in haar kantoor gesit," sê Katie Bell.

"Ag nee!" Lee Jordaan se hand vlieg na sy mond. "Dit was ek! Fred en George het 'n paar vir my gelos. Ek het hulle deur haar venster geleviteer."

"Sy sou hom in elk geval afgedank het," sê Dean. "Hy's te na aan Dompeldorius."

"Dis waar." Harry gaan sit in die leunstoel langs Hermien.

"Ek hoop net professor McGonagall is oukei," sê Hildegard huilerig.

"Hulle het haar kasteel toe gedra, ons het deur die venster gesien," sê Colin Creevey. "Sy't maar sleg gelyk."

"Madame Pomfrey sal haar wel regsien," sê Alicia Spinnet met groot beslistheid. "Sy kan enigiets doen."

Dis amper vieruur voor die geselskamer leeg is. Harry is helder wakker. Die beeld van Hagrid wat in die donker weghardloop, spook by hom. Hy is so kwaad vir Umbridge dat hy nie aan 'n aaklige genoeg straf vir haar kan dink nie, hoewel hy nogal hou van Ron se voorstel om haar in 'n houer vol honger spuitstertkrewels te gooi. Hy is vol wraakgedagtes toe hy eindelik aan die slaap raak en toe hy drie uur later moet opstaan, is hy alles behalwe uitgerus.

Hul laaste eksamen, Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns, is eers die middag. Harry sou baie graag ná ontbyt weer in die bed wou kruip, maar hy moet vir oulaas hersien. Hy gaan sit dus met sy kop in sy hande gestut voor die geselskamer se venster en doen sy bes om nie aan die slaap te raak nie terwyl hy die meterhoë stapel notas lees wat Hermien vir hom geleen het.

Die vyfdejaars gaan net voor twee-uur na die Groot Saal en neem hulle plekke in. Hulle vraestelle lê onderstebo op die lessenaars voor hulle. Harry is pootuit. Hy kan nie wag om die eksamen agter die rug te kry sodat hy kan gaan slaap nie. Mōre gaan hy en Ron na die Kwiddiekveld om hul vryheid te vier, Ron het gesê hy kan 'n paar draaie op sy besem gooi.

"Julle kan julle vraestelle omdraai" sê professor Maarsbank voor in die Groot Saal. Sy keer die uurglas om. "Julle mag begin."

Harry staar na die eerste vraag en ná 'n paar minute dring dit tot hom deur dat hy nie weet wat daar aangaan nie. 'n Perdeby gons teen een van die hoë vensters en trek sy aandag af.

Hy begin stadig skryf, maar hy sukkel om die name te onthou en raak deurmekaar met die datums. Hy slaan vraag 4 eenvoudig oor (*Het towerstafbeheer na jou mening bygedra tot, of gelei tot, beter beheer van gnoomrebellies in die agtiende eeu?*) met die idee dat hy later daarna sal terugkom as daar tyd is. Hy beantwoord vraag 5 (*Hoe is die Statuut van Geheimhouding in 1749 verbreek en watter maatreëls is getref om 'n herhaling te voorkom?*), maar vermoed hy het 'n hele paar belangrike feite vergeet, soos die vampiere – hy is seker hulle pas iewers in.

Hy blaai deur die vraestel op soek na 'n vraag wat hy kan doen en sy oog val op nommer 10: *Beskryf die omstandighede wat gelei het tot die stigting van die Internasionale Konfederasie vir Towenaars en verduidelik hoekom Liechtenstein se towenaars geweier het om aan te sluit.*

Dit ken ek, dink Harry, maar sy brein voel suf. Hy kan die opskrif in Hermien se handskrif voor hom sien: *Die ontstaan van die Internasionale Konfederasie vir Towenaars*. . . hy het die notas vanoggend gelees.

Hy begin skryf en kyk af en toe na die groot uurglas op die tafel langs professor Maarsbank. Voor hom sit Parvati Patel. Haar lang donker hare val oor haar stoel se rugkant en hy betrap hom 'n paar keer dat hy staar na die goue liggies wat daarin dans wanneer sy haar kop beweeg. Hy skud sy kop om sy gedagtes helder te kry.

die eerste Hoof towenaar van die Internasionale Konfederasie vir Towenaars was Pierre Bonaccord, maar sy aanstelling is deur die towenaarsgemeenskap van Liechtenstein teengestaan omdat -

Om Harry krap die veerpenne soos grawende rotpootjies op die perkament. Die son steek sy agterkop. Wat het Bonaccord gedoen wat die towenaars van Liechtenstein omgekrap het? Harry het 'n gevoel dit het iets met trolle uit te waai. . . hy staar weer beteuterd na Parvati se hare. As hy net Legilimensie kon doen. Dan sou hy 'n venster in haar kop kon oopmaak waardeur hy kon sien wat die trolle gedoen het om 'n breuk tussen Bonaccord en Liechtenstein te veroorsaak.

Harry maak sy oë toe en laat sak sy gesig in sy hande. Dit bring 'n bietjie verligting vir sy oë, wat soos kole vuur brand. Hy skryf twee reëls oor die trolle en lees dan wat hy tot dusver geskryf het. Dis maar min. Hy is seker Hermien het bladsye en bladsye oor die Konfederasie gehad.

Hy maak weer sy oë toe en probeer die notas voor hom sien, probeer onthou. . . die Konfederasie het die eerste keer in Frankryk vergader, ja, hy't dit reeds geskryf.

Gnome het dit probeer bywoon en is uitgeskop. . . hy het dit ook al.

En niemand van Liechtenstein wou kom nie. . .

Dink, sê hy vir homself, sy gesig in sy hande. Om hom krap die veerpenne op perkament en die sand syfer deur die uurglas.

Hy stap met die koel, donker gang af na die Departement vir Geheime, veerkragtig en doelgerig, partykeer hardloop hy, vasberade om by sy bestemming te kom. . . die swart deur swaai soos revore oop en hy is in die ronde vertrek met sy talle deure.

Oor die klipvloer en deur die tweede deur. . . kolle dansende lig teen die mure en vloer en daardie vreemde meganiese geklik, maar daar is nie tyd om ondersoek in te stel nie, hy moet opskud.

Hy draf die laaste entjie na die derde deur, wat nes die ander oopswaai. . .

Hy is weer in die katedraalgrootte vertrek vol rakke en glasballe . . . sy hart klop nou baie vinnig . . . hy gaan dit hierdie keer maak . . . toe hy by nommer sewe-en-negentig kom, draai hy links en draf met die gang tussen die twee rakke deur.

Maar daar is 'n vorm op die vloer aan die onderpunt, 'n swart gedaante wat soos 'n gewonde dier oor die vloer kruip . . . Harry se maag trek saam van angs . . . van opwinding . . .

'n Stem kom uit sy mond, 'n hoë, koue stem sonder enige sweem van menslikheid . . .

"Haal dit vir my af . . . haal dit af . . . ek kan nie daaraan raak nie, maar jy kan . . ."

Die swart vorm op die vloer beweeg effens. Harry sien aan die punt van sy eie arm 'n hand met lang wit vingers wat 'n towerstaf vashou . . . hy hoor die hoë, koue stem sê. "*Crucio!*"

Die man op die grond gil van pyn en probeer opstaan, maar hy val stuiptrekkend terug op die vloer. Harry lag. Hy lig die towerstaf en die vloek stol. Die figuur kreun en bly roerloos lê.

"Die heer Woldemort wag . . ."

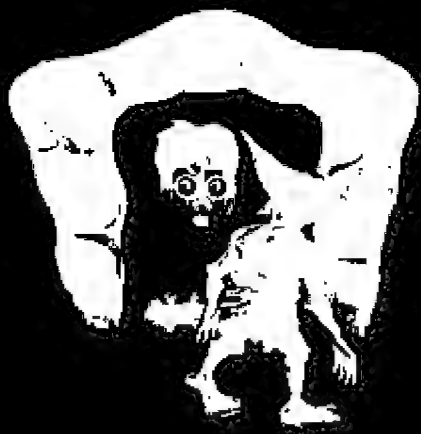
Die man stoot sy bolyf baie stadig en met bewende arms van die vloer af en kyk op. Sy gesig is bloedbevlek en stukkend, verwronge van pyn, maar tog uitdagend . . .

"Jy sal my moet doodmaak," fluister Sirius.

"Ek sal beslis later," sê die koue stem. "Maar nie voor jy dit vir my gaan haal het nie, Swardt . . . Dink jy dit wat jy nou gevoel het, is pyn? Dink weer . . . ons het ure tyd en niemand kan jou hoor skree nie . . ."

Maar 'n stem skree toe Woldemort sy towerstaf laat sak. Iemand skree hard en val uit 'n warm lessenaar op die koue klipvloer. Harry skrik wakker toe hy die vloer gillend tref. Sy litteken brand soos vuur en rondom hom bars chaos los in die Groot Saal.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



OUT OF THE FIRE

I'm not going . . . I don't need the hospital wing . . . I don't want . . .”

He was gibbering, trying to pull away from Professor Tofty, who was looking at him with much concern, and who had just helped Harry out into the entrance hall while the students all around them stared.

“I’m — I’m fine, sir,” Harry stammered, wiping the sweat from his face. “Really . . . I just fell asleep . . . Had a nightmare . . .”

“Pressure of examinations!” said the old wizard sympathetically, patting Harry shakily on the shoulder. “It happens, young man, it happens! Now, a cooling drink of water, and perhaps you will be

ready to return to the Great Hall? The examination is nearly over, but you may be able to round off your last answer nicely?"

"Yes," said Harry wildly. "I mean . . . no . . . I've done — done as much as I can, I think . . ."

"Very well, very well," said the old wizard gently. "I shall go and collect your examination paper, and I suggest that you go and have a nice lie down . . ."

"I'll do that," said Harry, nodding vigorously. "Thanks very much."

He waited for the second when the old man's heels disappeared over the threshold into the Great Hall, then ran up the marble staircase and then more staircases toward the hospital wing, hurtling along the corridors so fast that the portraits he passed muttered reproaches, and burst through the double doors like a hurricane, causing Madam Pomfrey, who had been spooning some bright blue liquid into Montague's open mouth, to shriek in alarm.

"Potter, what do you think you're doing?"

"I need to see Professor McGonagall," gasped Harry, the breath tearing his lungs. "Now . . . It's urgent . . ."

"She's not here, Potter," said Madam Pomfrey sadly. "She was transferred to St. Mungo's this morning. Four Stunning Spells straight to the chest at her age? It's a wonder they didn't kill her."

"She's . . . gone?" said Harry, stunned.

The bell rang just outside the dormitory, and he heard the usual distant rumbling of students starting to flood out into the corridors above and below him. He remained quite still, looking at Madam Pomfrey. Terror was rising inside him.

There was nobody left to tell. Dumbledore had gone, Hagrid had gone, but he had always expected Professor McGonagall to be there, irascible and inflexible, perhaps, but always dependably, solidly present. . . .

"I don't wonder you're shocked, Potter," said Madam Pomfrey with a kind of fierce approval in her face. "As if one of them could have Stunned Minerva McGonagall face on by daylight! Cowardice, that's what it was. . . . Despicable cowardice. . . . If I wasn't worried what would happen to you students without me, I'd resign in protest. . . ."

"Yes," said Harry blankly.

He strode blindly from the hospital wing into the teeming corridor where he stood, buffeted by the crowd, the panic expanding inside him like poison gas so that his head swam and he could not think what to do. . . .

Ron and Hermione, said a voice in his head.

He was running again, pushing students out of the way, oblivious to their angry protests and shouts. He sprinted back down two floors and was at the top of the marble staircase when he saw them hurrying toward him.

"Harry!" said Hermione at once, looking very frightened. "What happened? Are you all right? Are you ill?"

"Where have you been?" demanded Ron.

"Come with me," Harry said quickly. "Come on, I've got to tell you something. . . ."

He led them along the first-floor corridor, peering through doorways, and at last found an empty classroom into which he dived,

closing the door behind Ron and Hermione the moment they were inside and leaning against it, facing them.

“Voldemort’s got Sirius.”

“*What?*”

“How d’you — ?”

“Saw it. Just now. When I fell asleep in the exam.”

“But — but where? How?” said Hermione, whose face was white.

“I dunno how,” said Harry. “But I know exactly where. There’s a room in the Department of Mysteries full of shelves covered in these little glass balls, and they’re at the end of row ninety-seven . . . He’s trying to use Sirius to get whatever it is he wants from in there. . . . He’s torturing him. . . . Says he’ll end by killing him. . . .”

Harry found his voice was shaking, as were his knees. He moved over to a desk and sat down on it, trying to master himself.

“How’re we going to get there?” he asked them.

There was a moment’s silence. Then Ron said, “G-get there?”

“Get to the Department of Mysteries, so we can rescue Sirius!”

Harry said loudly.

“But — Harry . . .” said Ron weakly.

“What? *What?*” said Harry.

He could not understand why they were both gaping at him as though he was asking them something unreasonable.

“Harry,” said Hermione in a rather frightened voice, “er . . . how . . . how did Voldemort get into the Ministry of Magic without anybody realizing he was there?”

“How do I know?” bellowed Harry. “The question is how *we’re*

going to get in there!”

“But . . . Harry, think about this,” said Hermione, taking a step toward him. “It’s five o’clock in the afternoon. . . . The Ministry of Magic must be full of workers. . . . How would Voldemort and Sirius have got in without being seen? Harry . . . they’re probably the two most wanted wizards in the world. . . . You think they could get into a building full of Aurors undetected?”

“I dunno, Voldemort used an Invisibility Cloak or something!” Harry shouted. “Anyway, the Department of Mysteries has always been completely empty whenever I’ve been —”

“You’ve never been there, Harry,” said Hermione quietly. “You’ve dreamed about the place, that’s all.”

“They’re not normal dreams!” Harry shouted in her face, standing up and taking a step closer to her in turn. He wanted to shake her. “How d’you explain Ron’s dad then, what was all that about, how come I knew what had happened to him?”

“He’s got a point,” said Ron quietly, looking at Hermione.

“But this is just — just so *unlikely*!” said Hermione desperately. “Harry, how on earth could Voldemort have got hold of Sirius when he’s been in Grimmauld Place all the time?”

“Sirius might’ve cracked and just wanted some fresh air,” said Ron, sounding worried. “He’s been desperate to get out of that house for ages —”

“But why,” Hermione persisted, “why on earth would Voldemort want to use *Sirius* to get the weapon, or whatever the thing is?”

“I dunno, there could be loads of reasons!” Harry yelled at her. “Maybe Sirius is just someone Voldemort doesn’t care about seeing

hurt —”

“You know what, I’ve just thought of something,” said Ron in a hushed voice. “Sirius’s brother was a Death Eater, wasn’t he? Maybe he told Sirius the secret of how to get the weapon!”

“Yeah — and that’s why Dumbledore’s been so keen to keep Sirius locked up all the time!” said Harry.

“Look, I’m sorry,” cried Hermione, “but neither of you are making sense, and we’ve got no proof for any of this, no proof Voldemort and Sirius are even there —”

“Hermione, Harry’s seen them!” said Ron, rounding on her.

“Okay,” she said, looking frightened yet determined, “I’ve just got to say this . . .”

“What?”

“You . . . This isn’t a criticism, Harry! But you do . . . sort of . . . I mean — don’t you think you’ve got a bit of a — a — *saving-people-thing*?” she said.

He glared at her. “And what’s that supposed to mean, a ‘saving-people-thing’?”

“Well . . . you . . .” She looked more apprehensive than ever. “I mean . . . last year, for instance . . . in the lake . . . during the Tournament . . . you shouldn’t have . . . I mean, you didn’t need to save that little Delacour girl. . . . You got a bit . . . carried away . . .”

A wave of hot, prickly anger swept Harry’s body — how could she remind him of that blunder now?

“ . . . I mean, it was really great of you and everything,” said Hermione quickly, looking positively petrified at the look on Harry’s face. “Everyone thought it was a wonderful thing to do —”

“That’s funny,” said Harry in a trembling voice, “because I definitely remember Ron saying I’d wasted time *acting the hero*. Is that what you think this is? You reckon I want to act the hero again?”

“No, no, no!” said Hermione, looking aghast. “That’s not what I mean at all!”

“Well, spit out what you’ve got to say, because we’re wasting time here!” Harry shouted.

“I’m trying to say — Voldemort knows you, Harry! He took Ginny down into the Chamber of Secrets to lure you there, it’s the kind of thing he does, he knows you’re the — the sort of person who’d go to Sirius’s aid! What if he’s just trying to get you into the Department of Myst — ?”

“Hermione, it doesn’t matter if he’s done it to get me there or not — they’ve taken McGonagall to St. Mungo’s, there isn’t anyone left from the Order at Hogwarts who we can tell, and if we don’t go, Sirius is dead!”

“But Harry — what if your dream was — was just that, a dream?”

Harry let out a roar of frustration. Hermione actually stepped back from him, looking alarmed.

“You don’t get it!” Harry shouted at her. “I’m not having nightmares, I’m not just dreaming! What d’you think all the Occlumency was for, why d’you think Dumbledore wanted me prevented from seeing these things? Because they’re REAL, Hermione — Sirius is trapped — I’ve seen him — Voldemort’s got him, and no one else knows, and that means we’re the only ones who can save him, and if you don’t want to do it, fine, but I’m going.

understand? And if I remember rightly, you didn't have a problem with my *saving-people-thing* when it was you I was saving from the dementors, or" — he rounded on Ron — "when it was your sister I was saving from the basilisk —"

"I never said I had a problem!" said Ron heatedly.

"But Harry, you've just said it," said Hermione fiercely. "Dumbledore wanted you to learn to shut these things out of your mind, if you'd done Occlumency properly you'd never have seen this —"

"IF YOU THINK I'M JUST GOING TO ACT LIKE I HAVEN'T SEEN —"

"Sirius told you there was nothing more important than you learning to close your mind!"

"WELL, I EXPECT HE'D SAY SOMETHING DIFFERENT IF HE KNEW WHAT I'D JUST —"

The classroom door opened. Harry, Ron, and Hermione whipped around. Ginny walked in, looking curious, followed by Luna, who as usual looked as though she had drifted in accidentally.

"Hi," said Ginny uncertainly. "We recognized Harry's voice — what are you yelling about?"

"Never you mind," said Harry roughly.

Ginny raised her eyebrows.

"There's no need to take that tone with me," she said coolly. "I was only wondering whether I could help."

"Well, you can't," said Harry shortly.

"You're being rather rude, you know," said Luna serenely.

Harry swore and turned away. The very last thing he wanted now

was a conversation with Luna Lovegood.

“Wait,” said Hermione suddenly. “Wait. . . Harry, they *can* help.”

Harry and Ron looked at her.

“Listen,” she said urgently, “Harry, we need to establish whether Sirius really has left headquarters —”

“I’ve told you, I saw —”

“Harry, I’m begging you, please!” said Hermione desperately. “Please let’s just check that Sirius isn’t at home before we go charging off to London — if we find out he’s not there then I swear I won’t try and stop you, I’ll come, I’ll d-do whatever it takes to try and save him —”

“Sirius is being tortured NOW!” shouted Harry. “We haven’t got time to waste —”

“But if this is a trick of V-Voldemort’s — Harry, we’ve got to check, we’ve got to —”

“How?” Harry demanded. “How’re we going to check?”

“We’ll have to use Umbridge’s fire and see if we can contact him,” said Hermione, who looked positively terrified at the thought. “We’ll draw Umbridge away again, but we’ll need lookouts, and that’s where we can use Ginny and Luna.”

Though clearly struggling to understand what was going on, Ginny said immediately, “Yeah, we’ll do it,” and Luna said, “When you say ‘Sirius,’ are you talking about Stubby Boardman?”

Nobody answered her.

“Okay,” Harry said aggressively to Hermione, “Okay, if you can think of a way of doing this quickly, I’m with you, otherwise I’m going to the Department of Mysteries right now —”

“The Department of Mysteries?” said Luna, looking mildly surprised. “But how are you going to get there?”

Again, Harry ignored her.

“Right,” said Hermione, twisting her hands together and pacing up and down between the desks. “Right . . . well . . . One of us has to go and find Umbridge and — and send her off in the wrong direction, keep her away from her office. They could tell her — I don’t know — that Peeves is up to something awful as usual . . .”

“I’ll do it,” said Ron at once. “I’ll tell her Peeves is smashing up the Transfiguration department or something, it’s miles away from her office. Come to think of it, I could probably persuade Peeves to do it if I met him on the way . . .”

It was a mark of the seriousness of the situation that Hermione made no objection to the smashing up of the Transfiguration department.

“Okay,” she said, her brow furrowed as she continued to pace. “Now, we need to keep students away from her office while we force entry, or some Slytherin’s bound to go and tip her off . . .”

“Luna and I can stand at either end of the corridor,” said Ginny promptly, “and warn people not to go down there because someone’s let off a load of Garroting Gas.” Hermione looked surprised at the readiness with which Ginny had come up with this lie. Ginny shrugged and said, “Fred and George were planning to do it before they left.”

“Okay,” said Hermione, “well then, Harry, you and I will be under the Invisibility Cloak, and we’ll sneak into the office and you can talk to Sirius —”

“He’s not there, Hermione!”

“I mean, you can — can check whether Sirius is at home or not while I keep watch, I don’t think you should be in there alone, Lee’s already proved the window’s a weak spot, sending those nifflers through it.”

Even through his anger and impatience Harry recognized Hermione’s offer to accompany him into Umbridge’s office as a sign of solidarity and loyalty.

“I . . . okay, thanks,” he muttered.

“Right, well, even if we do all of that, I don’t think we’re going to be able to bank on more than five minutes,” said Hermione, looking relieved that Harry seemed to have accepted the plan, “not with Filch and the wretched Inquisitorial Squad floating around.”

“Five minutes’ll be enough,” said Harry. “C’mon, let’s go —”

“Now?” said Hermione, looking shocked.

“Of course now!” said Harry angrily. “What did you think, we’re going to wait until after dinner or something? Hermione, Sirius is being tortured *right now*!”

“I — oh all right,” she said desperately. “You go and get the Invisibility Cloak and we’ll meet you at the end of Umbridge’s corridor, okay?”

Harry did not answer, but flung himself out of the room and began to fight his way through the milling crowds outside. Two floors up he met Seamus and Dean, who hailed him jovially and told him they were planning a dusk-till-dawn end-of-exams celebration in the common room. Harry barely heard them. He scrambled through the portrait hole while they were still arguing about how many black-

market butterbeers they would need and was climbing back out of it, the Invisibility Cloak and Sirius's knife secure in his bag, before they noticed he had left them.

"Harry, d'you want to chip in a couple of Galleons? Harold Dingle reckons he could sell us some firewhisky . . ."

But Harry was already tearing away back along the corridor, and a couple of minutes later was jumping the last few stairs to join Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Luna, who were huddled together at the end of Umbridge's corridor.

"Got it," he panted. "Ready to go, then?"

"All right," whispered Hermione as a gang of loud sixth years passed them. "So Ron — you go and head Umbridge off. . . . Ginny, Luna, if you can start moving people out of the corridor. . . . Harry and I will get the Cloak on and wait until the coast is clear . . ."

Ron strode away, his bright red hair visible right to the end of the passage. Meanwhile, Ginny's equally vivid head bobbed between the jostling students surrounding them in the other direction, trailed by Luna's blonde one.

"Get over here," muttered Hermione, tugging at Harry's wrist and pulling him back into a recess where the ugly stone head of a medieval wizard stood muttering to itself on a column. "Are — are you sure you're okay, Harry? You're still very pale . . ."

"I'm fine," he said shortly, tugging the Invisibility Cloak from out of his bag. In truth, his scar was aching, but not so badly that he thought Voldemort had yet dealt Sirius a fatal blow. It had hurt much worse than this when Voldemort had been punishing Avery.

"Here," he said. He threw the Invisibility Cloak over both of them

and they stood listening carefully over the Latin mumblings of the bust in front of them.

“You can’t come down here!” Ginny was calling to the crowd. “No, sorry, you’re going to have to go round by the swiveling staircase, someone’s let off Garroting Gas just along here —”

They could hear people complaining; one surly voice said, “I can’t see no gas . . .”

“That’s because it’s colorless,” said Ginny in a convincingly exasperated voice, “but if you want to walk through it, carry on, then we’ll have your body as proof for the next idiot who didn’t believe us . . .”

Slowly the crowd thinned. The news about the Garroting Gas seemed to have spread — people were not coming this way anymore. When at last the surrounding area was quite clear, Hermione said quietly, “I think that’s as good as we’re going to get, Harry — come on, let’s do it.”

Together they moved forward, covered by the Cloak. Luna was standing with her back to them at the far end of the corridor. As they passed Ginny, Hermione whispered, “Good one . . . don’t forget the signal . . .”

“What’s the signal?” muttered Harry, as they approached Umbridge’s door.

“A loud chorus of ‘Weasley Is Our King’ if they see Umbridge coming,” replied Hermione, as Harry inserted the blade of Sirius’s knife in the crack between door and wall. The lock clicked open, and they entered the office.

The garish kittens were basking in the late afternoon sunshine.

warming their plates, but otherwise the office was as still and empty as last time. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

“I thought she might have added extra security after the second niffler . . .”

They pulled off the Cloak. Hermione hurried over to the window and stood out of sight, peering down into the grounds with her wand out. Harry dashed over to the fireplace, seized the pot of Floo powder, and threw a pinch into the grate, causing emerald flames to burst into life there. He knelt down quickly, thrust his head into the dancing fire, and cried, “Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!”

His head began to spin as though he had just got off a fairground ride though his knees remained firmly planted upon the cold office floor. He kept his eyes screwed up against the whirling ash, and when the spinning stopped, he opened them to find himself looking out upon the long, cold kitchen of Grimmauld Place.

There was nobody there. He had expected this, yet was not prepared for the molten wave of dread and panic that seemed to burst through his stomach floor at the sight of the deserted room.

“Sirius?” he shouted. “Sirius, are you there?”

His voice echoed around the room, but there was no answer except a tiny scuffling sound to the right of the fire.

“Who’s there?” he called, wondering whether it was just a mouse.

Kreacher the house-elf came creeping into view. He looked highly delighted about something, though he seemed to have recently sustained a nasty injury to both hands, which were heavily bandaged.

“It’s the Potter boy’s head in the fire,” Kreacher informed the empty kitchen, stealing furtive, oddly triumphant glances at Harry.

“What has he come for, Kreacher wonders?”

“Where’s Sirius, Kreacher?” Harry demanded.

The house-elf gave a wheezy chuckle. “Master has gone out, Harry Potter.”

“Where’s he gone? *Where’s he gone, Kreacher?*”

Kreacher merely cackled.

“I’m warning you!” said Harry, fully aware that his scope for inflicting punishment upon Kreacher was almost nonexistent in this position. “What about Lupin? Mad-Eye? Any of them, are any of them here?”

“Nobody here but Kreacher!” said the elf gleefully, and turning away from Harry he began to walk slowly toward the door at the end of the kitchen. “Kreacher thinks he will have a little chat with his Mistress now, yes, he hasn’t had a chance in a long time, Kreacher’s Master has been keeping him away from her —”

“Where has Sirius gone?” Harry yelled after the elf. “*Kreacher, has he gone to the Department of Mysteries?*”

Kreacher stopped in his tracks. Harry could just make out the back of his bald head through the forest of chair legs before him.

“Master does not tell poor Kreacher where he is going,” said the elf quietly.

“But you know!” shouted Harry. “Don’t you? You know where he is!”

There was a moment’s silence, then the elf let out his loudest cackle yet. “Master will not come back from the Department of Mysteries!” he said gleefully. “Kreacher and his Mistress are alone again!”

And he scurried forward and disappeared through the door to the hall.

“You — !”

But before he could utter a single curse or insult, Harry felt a great pain at the top of his head. He inhaled a lot of ash and, choking, found himself being dragged backward through the flames until, with a horrible abruptness, he was staring up into the wide, pallid face of Professor Umbridge, who had dragged him backward out of the fire by the hair and was now bending his neck back as far as it would go as though she was going to slit his throat.

“You think,” she whispered, bending Harry’s neck back even farther, so that he was looking up at the ceiling above him, “that after two nifflers I was going to let one more foul, scavenging little creature enter my office without my knowledge? I had Stealth Sensoring Spells placed all around my doorway after the last one got in, you foolish boy. Take his wand,” she barked at someone he could not see, and he felt a hand grope inside the chest pocket of his robes and remove the wand. “Hers too . . .”

Harry heard a scuffle over by the door and knew that Hermione had just had her wand wrested from her as well.

“I want to know why you are in my office,” said Umbridge, shaking the fist clutching his hair so that he staggered.

“I was — trying to get my Firebolt!” Harry croaked.

“Liar.” She shook his head again. “Your Firebolt is under strict guard in the dungeons, as you very well know, Potter. You had your head in my fire. With whom have you been communicating?”

“No one —” said Harry, trying to pull away from her. He felt

several hairs part company with his scalp.

“*Liar!*” shouted Umbridge. She threw him from her, and he slammed into the desk. Now he could see Hermione pinioned against the wall by Millicent Bulstrode. Malfoy was leaning on the windowsill, smirking as he threw Harry’s wand into the air one-handed and then caught it again.

There was a commotion outside and several large Slytherins entered, each gripping Ron, Ginny, Luna, and — to Harry’s bewilderment — Neville, who was trapped in a stranglehold by Crabbe and looked in imminent danger of suffocation. All four of them had been gagged.

“Got ’em all,” said Warrington, shoving Ron roughly forward into the room. “*That* one,” he poked a thick finger at Neville, “tried to stop me taking *her*,” he pointed at Ginny, who was trying to kick the shins of the large Slytherin girl holding her, “so I brought him along too.”

“Good, good,” said Umbridge, watching Ginny’s struggles. “Well, it looks as though Hogwarts will shortly be a Weasley-free zone, doesn’t it?”

Malfoy laughed loudly and sycophantically. Umbridge gave her wide, complacent smile and settled herself into a chintz-covered armchair, blinking up at her captives like a toad in a flowerbed.

“So, Potter,” she said. “You stationed lookouts around my office and you sent this buffoon,” she nodded at Ron, and Malfoy laughed even louder, “to tell me the poltergeist was wreaking havoc in the Transfiguration department when I knew perfectly well that he was busy smearing ink on the eyepieces of all the school telescopes, Mr.

Filch having just informed me so.

“Clearly, it was very important for you to talk to somebody. Was it Albus Dumbledore? Or the half-breed, Hagrid? I doubt it was Minerva McGonagall, I hear she is still too ill to talk to anyone . . .”

Malfoy and a few of the other members of the Inquisitorial Squad laughed some more at that. Harry found he was so full of rage and hatred he was shaking.

“It’s none of your business who I talk to,” he snarled.

Umbridge’s slack face seemed to tighten.

“Very well,” she said in her most dangerous and falsely sweet voice. “Very well, Mr. Potter . . . I offered you the chance to tell me freely. You refused. I have no alternative but to force you. Draco — fetch Professor Snape.”

Malfoy stowed Harry’s wand inside his robes and left the room smirking, but Harry hardly noticed. He had just realized something; he could not believe he had been so stupid as to forget it. He had thought that all the members of the Order, all those who could help him save Sirius, were gone — but he had been wrong. There was still a member of the Order of the Phoenix at Hogwarts — Snape.

There was silence in the office except for the fidgetings and scufflings resultant from the Slytherins’ efforts to keep Ron and the others under control. Ron’s lip was bleeding onto Umbridge’s carpet as he struggled against Warrington’s half nelson. Ginny was still trying to stamp on the feet of the sixth-year girl who had both her upper arms in a tight grip. Neville was turning steadily more purple in the face while tugging at Crabbe’s arms, and Hermione was attempting vainly to throw Millicent Bulstrode off her. Luna,

however, stood limply by the side of her captor, gazing vaguely out of the window as though rather bored by the proceedings.

Harry looked back at Umbridge, who was watching him closely. He kept his face deliberately smooth and blank as footsteps were heard in the corridor outside and Draco Malfoy came back into the room, holding open the door for Snape.

“You wanted to see me, Headmistress?” said Snape, looking around at all the pairs of struggling students with an expression of complete indifference.

“Ah, Professor Snape,” said Umbridge, smiling widely and standing up again. “Yes, I would like another bottle of Veritaserum, as quick as you can, please.”

“You took my last bottle to interrogate Potter,” he said, observing her coolly through his greasy curtains of black hair. “Surely you did not use it all? I told you that three drops would be sufficient.”

Umbridge flushed.

“You can make some more, can’t you?” she said, her voice becoming more sweetly girlish as it always did when she was furious.

“Certainly,” said Snape, his lip curling. “It takes a full moon cycle to mature, so I should have it ready for you in around a month.”

“A month?” squawked Umbridge, swelling toadishly. “A *month*? But I need it this evening, Snape! I have just found Potter using my fire to communicate with a person or persons unknown!”

“Really?” said Snape, showing his first, faint sign of interest as he looked around at Harry. “Well, it doesn’t surprise me. Potter has never shown much inclination to follow school rules.”

His cold, dark eyes were boring into Harry's, who met his gaze unflinchingly, concentrating hard on what he had seen in his dream, willing Snape to read it in his mind, to understand . . .

"I wish to interrogate him!" shouted Umbridge angrily, and Snape looked away from Harry back into her furiously quivering face. "I wish you to provide me with a potion that will force him to tell me the truth!"

"I have already told you," said Snape smoothly, "that I have no further stocks of Veritaserum. Unless you wish to poison Potter — and I assure you I would have the greatest sympathy with you if you did — I cannot help you. The only trouble is that most venoms act too fast to give the victim much time for truth-telling . . ."

Snape looked back at Harry, who stared at him, frantic to communicate without words.

Voldemort's got Sirius in the Department of Mysteries, he thought desperately. *Voldemort's got Sirius —*

"You are on probation!" shrieked Professor Umbridge, and Snape looked back at her, his eyebrows slightly raised. "You are being deliberately unhelpful! I expected better, Lucius Malfoy always speaks most highly of you! Now get out of my office!"

Snape gave her an ironic bow and turned to leave. Harry knew his last chance of letting the Order know what was going on was walking out of the door.

"He's got Padfoot!" he shouted. "He's got Padfoot at the place where it's hidden!"

Snape had stopped with his hand on Umbridge's door handle.

"Padfoot?" cried Professor Umbridge, looking eagerly from Harry

to Snape. "What is Padfoot? Where what is hidden? What does he mean, Snape?"

Snape looked around at Harry. His face was inscrutable. Harry could not tell whether he had understood or not, but he did not dare speak more plainly in front of Umbridge.

"I have no idea," said Snape coldly. "Potter, when I want nonsense shouted at me I shall give you a Babbling Beverage. And Crabbe, loosen your hold a little, if Longbottom suffocates it will mean a lot of tedious paperwork, and I am afraid I shall have to mention it on your reference if ever you apply for a job."

He closed the door behind him with a snap, leaving Harry in a state of worse turmoil than before: Snape had been his very last hope. He looked at Umbridge, who seemed to be feeling the same way; her chest was heaving with rage and frustration.

"Very well," she said, and she pulled out her wand. "Very well. I am left with no alternative. . . . This is more than a matter of school discipline. . . . This is an issue of Ministry security. . . . Yes . . . yes . . ."

She seemed to be talking herself into something. She was shifting her weight nervously from foot to foot, staring at Harry, beating her wand against her empty palm and breathing heavily. Harry felt horribly powerless without his own wand as he watched her.

"You are forcing me, Potter. . . . I do not want to," said Umbridge, still moving restlessly on the spot, "but sometimes circumstances justify the use . . . I am sure the Minister will understand that I had no choice . . ."

Malfoy was watching her with a hungry expression on his face.

"The Cruciatus Curse ought to loosen your tongue," said Umbridge quietly.

"No!" shrieked Hermione. "Professor Umbridge — it's illegal" — but Umbridge took no notice. There was a nasty, eager, excited look on her face that Harry had never seen before. She raised her wand.

"The Minister wouldn't want you to break the law, Professor Umbridge!" cried Hermione.

"What Cornelius doesn't know won't hurt him," said Umbridge, who was now panting slightly as she pointed her wand at different parts of Harry's body in turn, apparently trying to decide what would hurt the most. "He never knew I ordered dementors after Potter last summer, but he was delighted to be given the chance to expel him, all the same. . . ."

"It was *you*?" gasped Harry. "*You* sent the dementors after me?"

"*Somebody* had to act," breathed Umbridge, as her wand came to rest pointing directly at Harry's forehead. "They were all bleating about silencing you somehow — discrediting you — but I was the one who actually *did* something about it. . . . Only you wriggled out of that one, didn't you, Potter? Not today, though, not now. . . ."

And taking a deep breath, she cried, "*Cruc* —"

"NO!" shouted Hermione in a cracked voice from behind Millicent Bulstrode. "No — Harry — Harry, we'll have to tell her!"

"No way!" yelled Harry, staring at the little of Hermione he could see.

"We'll have to, Harry, she'll force it out of you anyway, what's . . . what's the point . . . ?"

And Hermione began to cry weakly into the back of Millicent

Bulstrode's robes. Millicent stopped trying to squash her against the wall immediately and dodged out of her way looking disgusted.

"Well, well, well!" said Umbridge, looking triumphant. "Little Miss Question-All is going to give us some answers! Come on then, girl, come on!"

"Er — my — nee — no!" shouted Ron through his gag.

Ginny was staring at Hermione as though she had never seen her before; Neville, still choking for breath, was gazing at her too. But Harry had just noticed something. Though Hermione was sobbing desperately into her hands, there was no trace of a tear.

"I'm — I'm sorry everyone," said Hermione. "But — I can't stand it —"

"That's right, that's right, girl!" said Umbridge, seizing Hermione by the shoulders, thrusting her into the abandoned chintz chair and leaning over her. "Now then . . . with whom was Potter communicating just now?"

"Well," gulped Hermione into her hands, "well, he was *trying* to speak to Professor Dumbledore . . ."

Ron froze, his eyes wide; Ginny stopped trying to stamp on her Slytherin captor's toes; even Luna looked mildly surprised. Fortunately, the attention of Umbridge and her minions was focused too exclusively upon Hermione to notice these suspicious signs.

"Dumbledore?" said Umbridge eagerly. "You know where Dumbledore is, then?"

"Well . . . no!" sobbed Hermione. "We've tried the Leaky Cauldron in Diagon Alley and the Three Broomsticks and even the Hog's Head —"

“Idiot girl, Dumbledore won’t be sitting in a pub when the whole Ministry’s looking for him!” shouted Umbridge, disappointment etched in every sagging line of her face.

“But — but we needed to tell him something important!” wailed Hermione, holding her hands more tightly over her face, not, Harry knew, out of anguish, but to disguise the continued absence of tears.

“Yes?” said Umbridge with a sudden resurgence of excitement. “What was it you wanted to tell him?”

“We . . . we wanted to tell him it’s r-ready!” choked Hermione.

“What’s ready?” demanded Umbridge, and now she grabbed Hermione’s shoulders again and shook her slightly. “What’s ready, girl?”

“The . . . the weapon,” said Hermione.

“Weapon? Weapon?” said Umbridge, and her eyes seemed to pop with excitement. “You have been developing some method of resistance? A weapon you could use against the Ministry? On Professor Dumbledore’s orders, of course?”

“Y-y-yes,” gasped Hermione. “But he had to leave before it was finished and n-n-now we’ve finished it for him, and we c-c-can’t find him t-t-to tell him!”

“What kind of weapon is it?” said Umbridge harshly, her stubby hands still tight on Hermione’s shoulders.

“We don’t r-r-really understand it,” said Hermione, sniffing loudly. “We j-j-just did what P-P-Professor Dumbledore told us t-t-to do . . .”

Umbridge straightened up, looking exultant.

“Lead me to the weapon,” she said.

“I’m not showing . . . *them*,” said Hermione shrilly, looking around at the Slytherins through her fingers.

“It is not for you to set conditions,” said Professor Umbridge harshly.

“Fine,” said Hermione, now sobbing into her hands again, “fine . . . let them see it, I hope they use it on you! In fact, I wish you’d invite loads and loads of people to come and see! Th-that would serve you right — oh, I’d love it if the wh-whole school knew where it was, and how to u-use it, and then if you annoy any of them they’ll be able to s-sort you out!”

These words had a powerful impact on Umbridge. She glanced swiftly and suspiciously around at her Inquisitorial Squad, her bulging eyes resting for a moment on Malfoy, who was too slow to disguise the look of eagerness and greed that had appeared on his face.

Umbridge contemplated Hermione for another long moment and then spoke in what she clearly thought was a motherly voice. “All right, dear, let’s make it just you and me . . . and we’ll take Potter too, shall we? Get up, now —”

“Professor,” said Malfoy eagerly, “Professor Umbridge, I think some of the squad should come with you to look after —”

“I am a fully qualified Ministry official, Malfoy, do you really think I cannot manage two wandless teenagers alone?” asked Umbridge sharply. “In any case, it does not sound as though this weapon is something that schoolchildren should see. You will remain here until I return and make sure none of these” — she gestured around at Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna — “escape.”

“All right,” said Malfoy, looking sulky and disappointed.

“And you two can go ahead of me and show me the way,” said Umbridge, pointing at Harry and Hermione with her wand. “Lead on . . .”

Uit die vuur

“Ek gaan nie . . . ek hoef nie siekeboeg toe . . . ek wil nie . . .”

Harry yl amper terwyl hy hom uit professor Tofty se greep probeer loswikkel. Die bejaarde onderwyser het hom na die ingangsportaal gehelp, weg van die studente se starende oë, en kyk nou bekommerd na hom.

“Ek – ek’s oukei, Professor,” stamel Harry. Hy vee die sweet van sy gesig af. “Regtig . . . ek het aan die slaap geraak . . . n nag-merrie . . .”

“Eksamendruk!” sê die ou towenaar simpatiek en gee vir Harry ’n bewerige kloppie teen die skouer. “Dit gebeur, jonge man, dit gebeur! Wat van ’n verfrissende beker water voor jy teruggaan Groot Saal toe? Die tyd is amper verstreke, maar daar is dalk nog genoeg tyd om jou laaste antwoord af te rond.”

“Ja,” sê Harry wildweg. “Ek bedoel . . . nee . . . ek dink ek het alles gedoen wat . . . wat ek kan . . .”

“Goed dan, goed dan,” sê die ou towenaar vertroostend. “Ek sal jou vraestel inneem, maar ek stel voor dat jy ’n bietjie gaan lê.”

“Ek sal.” Harry knik woes. “Baie dankie.”

Die oomblik toe die ou man in die Groot Saal verdwyn, hardloop Harry met die marmertappe op en teen so ’n dollé vaart deur die gange dat die portrette met hom begin raas. Hy storm met nog ’n paar stelle trappe op en bars soos ’n orkaan deur die siekeboeg se dubbeldeure sodat Madame Pomfrey, wat besig was om ’n lepel vol helderblou vloeistof in Montague se oop mond te gooi, verskrik uitroep.

“Potter, wat dink jy doen jy?”

“Ek moet vir professor McGonagall sien.” Harry snak na asem. “Nou . . . dis dringend!”

“Sy’s nie hier nie,” sê Madame Pomfrey ontsteld. “Sy’s vanoggend oorgeplaas na Sint Mungo. Vier Bedwelmpaljasse teen die bors op haar ouderdom. Dis ’n wonder sy’s nie dood nie.”

“Sy . . . is nie hier nie?” sê Harry geskok.

Die klok lui net buite die siekeboeg en hy hoor die gewone gerammel soos die studente deur die gange bo en onder hom stroom. Hy staan roerloos na Madame Pomfrey terwyl 'n vreeslike angs hom beetpak.

Daar is niemand oor vir wie hy kan sê nie. Dompeldorius is weg, Hagrid is weg, maar hy was vas oortuig dat professor McGonagall hier gaan wees, opvlieënd en streng soos gewoonlik, maar altyd betroubaar en daar vir hulle.

"Ek is nie verbaas dat jy geskok is nie, Potter," sê Madame Pomfrey met 'n vreemde soort goedkeuring in haar stem. "Asof een van hulle vir Minerva McGonagall van aangesig tot aangesig in die helder daglig sou kon Bedwelm! Lafhartigheid, dis wat dit was . . . veragtelike lafhartigheid. . . . As ek nie so bekommerd was oor wat van julle sal word as ek nie hier is nie, het ek sowaar uit protes bedank!"

"Hm, ja," sê Harry beteuterd.

Hy stap blindweg uit die siekeboeg na die besige gang, waar hy vassteek sodat die mense in die verbystap teen hom bots. Paniek vloei soos 'n gifgas deur hom. Sy kop swem. Hy weet nie wat om te doen nie . . .

Ron en Hermien, sê 'n stem in sy kop.

Hy begin weer hardloop, stamp studente uit die pad en steur hom nie aan hul proteskrete nie. Hy storm met twee stappe af en is by die marmertappe toe hy hulle sien nader kom.

Hermien lyk bevrees. "Harry!" sê sy dadelik, "wat het gebeur? Is jy oukei? Voel jy siek?"

"Waar was jy?" vra Ron.

"Kom saam," sê Harry vinnig. "Komaan, daar's iets wat ek julle moet vertel."

Hy stap deur die gang op die eerste verdieping en loer by al die deure in tot hy 'n leë klaskamer sien. Hy glip by die deur in en toe Ron en Hermien binne is, druk hy dit agter hulle toe. Hy leun teen die deur en staan na hulle.

"Woldemort het vir Sirius."

"Wat?"

"Hoe weet jy?"

"Het gesien. Netnou. Toe ek in die Saal aan die slaap geraak het."

"Maar – maar waar? Hoe?" sê Hermien, haar gesig wil

"Ek weet nie hoe nie, maar ek weet presies waar. Daar's 'n kamer in die Departement vir Geheime met 'n klomp rakke met sulke glasballe op. Hulle is aan die end van ry sewe-en-negentig . . . hy wil hê Sirius moet iets vir hom afhaal . . . hy martel hom . . . hy sê hy gaan hom doodmaak!"

Harry se stem en knieë bewe en hy gaan sit op 'n lessenaar en probeer om tot bedaring te kom.

"Hoe kom ons daar?" vra hy vir Ron en Hermien.

Dis vir 'n oomblik doodstil. Toe sê Ron: "Kom w-waar?"

"By die Departement vir Geheime, om vir Sirius te red!" sê Harry hard.

"Maar – Harry . . ." sê Ron floutjies.

"Wat? Wat?"

Hy kan nie verstaan hoekom hulle hom aangaap asof sy vraag onredelik is nie.

"Harry," sê Hermien in 'n verskrikte stem, "hm . . . hoe . . . hoe het Woldemort in die Ministerie vir Towerkuns gekom sonder dat iemand weet hy is daar?"

"Hoe moet ek weet?" skree Harry. "Die vraag is, hoe gaan ons daar inkom?"

"Maar . . . Harry, dink daaroor." Hermien tree effens nader aan hom. "Dis vyfuur in die middag . . . die Ministerie vir Towerkuns sal vol mense wees . . . hoe kon Woldemort en Sirius daar inkom sonder dat iemand hulle sien? Harry . . . hulle is die twee mees gesoekte towenaars in die wêreld . . . en jy dink hulle is in 'n gebou vol Aurors sonder dat iemand van hulle weet?"

"Ek weet nie, Woldemort kon 'n onsigbaarheidskleed gebruik het of iets! In elk geval, die Departement vir Geheime was nog altyd leeg as ek daar was –"

"Jy was nog nooit daar nie, Harry," sê Hermien stil. "Jy't nog net daaroor gedroom, dis al."

"Dis nie gewone drome nie, Hermien!" Harry spring op en gee 'n tree nader aan haar. Hy wil haar skud. "Hoe verklaar jy Ron se pa? Wat het daar aangegaan? Hoekom het ek geweet wat met hom gebeur het?"

"Hy het 'n punt," sê Ron stilweg vir Hermien.

"Maar dis so – *onwaarskynlik!*" sê Hermien radeloos. "Harry, hoe op aarde kon Woldemort vir Sirius in die hande kry as hy nog die hele tyd in Grimmauldplein is?"

"Dalk het Sirius uitgeglip," sê Ron bekommerd. "Hy wil al lankal uit daardie huis kom –"

"Maar hoekom?" dring Hermien aan. "Hoekom op aarde sal Woldemort vir Sirius gebruik om die wapen te kry, wat dit ook al mag wees?"

"Ek weet nie, daar kan tonne redes wees!" skree Harry. "Dalk wil Woldemort net vir Sirius seermaak –"

"Weet jy wat, ek dink nou aan iets," sê Ron sag. "Sirius se broer

was 'n Doodseter. Dalk het hy vir Sirius gesê hoe om die wapen te kry!"

"Ja, dit kan wees hoekom Dompeldorius wil hê Sirius moet die hele tyd in die huis toegesluit bly," sê Harry.

"Hoor hier, ek is jammer," sê Hermien, "maar dit maak nie sin nie en ons het geen bewyse vir enigiets nie. Nie eens dat Woldemort en Sirius regtig daar is nie –"

"Hermien, Harry het hulle gesien!" sê Ron kwaai.

"Oukei, oukei!" Sy klink tegelyk bekommerd en vasberade. "Maar ek moet dit sê –"

"Wat?"

"Jy . . . en dis nie kritiek nie, Harry . . . maar jy't soort van . . . ek bedoel – dink jy nie jy ly 'n bietjie aan 'n *ek-moet-almal-red-sindroom* nie?"

Harry gluur haar aan.

"En wat beteken dit miskien? 'n *Ek-moet-almal-red-sindroom*?"

"Wel . . . jy . . ." sy lyk baie bedug, "ek bedoel . . . soos verlede jaar in die meer . . . tydens die toernooi . . . jy moes nie . . . ek bedoel, dit was nie nodig dat jy daardie Delacour-meisiekind red nie . . . jy't 'n bietjie . . . meegevoer geraak . . ."

Harry is op die plek smoorkwaad. Hoe durf sy daardie flater nou teen hom gebruik?

Hermien lyk verskriklik benoud toe sy Harry se gesigsuitdrukking sien. "Ek bedoel, dit was baie dapper van jou en alles," sê sy vinnig. "Almal het gedink dit was 'n wonderlike ding wat jy gedoen het –"

"Dis snaaks," sê Harry deur geknersde tande, "want ek onthou duidelik dat Ron gesê het ek het tyd gemors omdat ek 'n held wou wees . . . Is dit wat jy dink? Dat ek weer 'n held wil wees?"

"Nee, nee, nee!" sê Hermien ontsteld. "Dis glad nie wat ek bedoel nie!"

"Wel, sê dan wat jy wil sê, want ons is besig om tyd te mors!" bulder Harry

"Wat ek probeer sê, is dit: Woldemort ken jou, Harry! Hy't vir Ginny na die Kamer vir Geheimenisse geneem om jou soontoe te lok, dis die soort ding wat hy doen, hy weet jy's die – die soort mens wat vir Sirius sal wil help! Wat as hy net probeer om jou in die Departement vir Geheime –?"

"Hermien, dit maak nie saak of hy probeer om my daar te kry of nie. Hulle het vir McGonagall na Sint Mungo geneem, daar is niemand van die Orde by Hogwarts vir wie ek kan vertel nie, en as ons nie na die Ministerie gaan nie, is Sirius dood!"

“Maar Harry – wat as jou droom – wat as dit net ’n droom was?” Harry kan skree van frustrasie en Hermien gee benoud ’n tree agteruit.

“Ek glo dit nie!” gil Harry. “Dis nie net nagmerries of drome nie! Waarvoor dink jy was al daardie Okklumensie-lesse? Hoekom dink jy wil Dompeldorius nie hê ek moet daardie goed sien nie? Omdat hulle WAAR is, Hermien – Sirius is in Woldemort se kloue! Ek het hom gesien. Woldemort het hom en niemand anders weet dit nie. As jy my nie wil help nie, dan’s dit oukei, maar *ek gaan!* En buitendien, as ek reg onthou, het jy nie ’n probleem gehad met my ‘*Ek-moet-al-mal-red-sindroom*’ toe ek jou van die Dementors gered het, of –” hy swaai na Ron, “– jou suster van die basilisk nie –”

“Ek het nie gesê ek het ’n probleem met iets nie!” sê Ron vererg.

“Maar Harry, daar sê jy dit self,” sê Hermien koppig. “Dompeldorius wil hê jy moet jou verstand sluit. As jy Okklumensie behoorlik kon doen, sou jy dit nie gesien het nie.”

“AS JY DINK EK GAAN MAAK OF EK NIKS GESIEN HET NIE –”

“Sirius het vir jou gesê daar is niks belangrikers as om jou verstand te sluit nie!”

“WEL, EK IS SEKER HY SAL ANDERS VOEL AS HY WEET WAT EK SO PAS –!”

Die klaskamer se deur gaan oop. Harry, Ron en Hermien vlieg om. Ginny stap in, met Mania, wat soos gewoonlik lyk of sy per ongeluk iewers ingesweef het, agterna.

“Hallo,” sê Ginny huiwerig. “Ons het Harry se stem herken. Hoekom skree jy so?”

“Dit het niks met jou uit te waai nie,” sê Harry kortaf.

Ginny lig haar wenkbroue.

“Dis nie nodig om so met my te praat nie,” sê sy kil. “Ek het net gewonder of ek dalk kan help.”

“Wel, jy kan nie,” sê Harry bars.

“Jy’s nogal ongeskik, weet jy,” sê Mania rustig.

Harry draai met ’n vloekwoord weg. Die laaste ding waarin hy nou belangstel, is ’n gesprek met Mania Goedlief.

“Wag,” sê Hermien skielik. “Wag . . . Harry, hulle *kan* ons help.”

Harry en Ron kyk na haar.

“Hoor hier, Harry,” sê sy dringend, “ons moet uitvind of Sirius by Hoofkwartier is of nie.”

“Ek het mos gesê ek het hom gesien –”

“Harry, ek smeeek jou, luister *asseblief* na my!” sê Hermien wanhopig. “Kan ons net uitvind of Sirius by die huis is voor ons Londen toe gaan? As hy nie daar is nie, sweer ek ek sal jou nie

probeer keer nie. Ek sal saamkom en – ek sal my b-bes doen om hom te help.”

“Sirius word NOU gemartel!” skree Harry. “Ons kan nie nog tyd mors nie!”

“Maar ons moet weet of dit ’n strik is wat Woldemort vir jou stel, Harry, ons moet net.”

“Hoe?” vra Harry. “Hoe gaan ons weet?”

“Ons moet Umbridge se vuur gebruik en kyk of ons Sirius kan kontak.” Hermien lyk beangs by die gedagte, maar sy druk deur. “Ons moet weer vir Umbridge weglok, maar ons het wagte nodig en dis waar Ginny en Mania kan help.”

Hoewel dit duidelik is dat hulle glad nie verstaan wat aangaan nie, sê Ginny dadelik: “Ja, ons sal dit doen,” en Mania sê: “As julle ‘Sirius’ sê, bedoel julle Stompie Shuster?”

Niemand antwoord nie.

“Oukei,” sê Harry aggressief vir Hermien. “Oukei, as jy aan ’n manier kan dink om dit gou te doen, anders gaan ek nou na die Departement vir Geheime.”

“Die Departement vir Geheime?” sê Mania verbaas. “Hoe gaan jy daar kom?”

Harry ignoreer haar weer.

“Goed.” Hermien stap handewringend op en neer tussen die lesse-naars. “Goed. . . wel. . . een van ons moet vir Umbridge gaan soek en – en haar op ’n dwaalspoor stuur. . . en haar van haar kantoor af weghou. Sê vir haar – ek weet nie – dat Nurks iets vreesliks doen.”

“Ek sal,” sê Ron dadelik. “Ek sal vir haar sê Nurks is besig om die Transfigurasie-departement te verwoes of so iets. Dis myle van haar kantoor af. Dalk loop ek nog vir Nurks langs die pad raak, dan vra ek hom sommer om dit regtig te doen.”

Dis ’n teken van die erns van die situasie dat Hermien geen beware opper teen die verwoesting van die Transfigurasie-departement nie.

“Goed,” sê sy fronsend. “En ons moet die studente van haar kantoor af weghou sodat die een of ander Slibberin haar nie kan waar-sku nie.”

“Mania en ek sal by die end van die gang wagstaan,” sê Ginny dadelik, “en die mense waarsku om nie daarlangs te gaan nie omdat iemand ’n spul Wurggas daar vrygelaat het.” Hermien lyk verbaas oor hierdie flinke leuen, maar Ginny lig haar skouers en sê: “Fred en George was van plan om dit te doen voor hulle weg is.”

“Goed,” sê Hermien. “Harry, ek en jy sal onder die onsigbaarheidsmantel na haar kantoor gaan en jy kan met Sirius praat –”

"Hy's nie daar nie, Hermien!"

"Ek bedoel, jy kan kyk of Sirius daar is terwyl ek waghou. Ek dink nie jy moet alleen daar ingaan nie. Lee het reeds bewys dat die venster 'n swak plek is toe hy die niffers daar ingelaat het."

Ten spyte van sy woede en ongeduld, weet Harry dat Hermien se aanbod om saam met hom na Umbridge se kantoor te gaan 'n teken van solidariteit en loyaliteit is.

"Ek . . . oukei, dankie," brom hy.

Hermien lyk verlig dat Harry haar plan aanvaar het. "Goed, wel, selfs al loop alles reg, dink ek nie ons gaan meer as vyf minute hê nie – nie met Fillis en daardie mislike Ondersoektaakmag in die rondte nie."

"Vyf minute is genoeg," sê Harry. "Kom."

"Nou?" sê Hermien onthuts.

"Natuurlik nou!" sê Harry omgekrap. "Wat het jy gedink? Dat ons eers ná aandete gaan of iets? Hermien, Sirius word op hierdie oomblik gemartel!"

"Ek – o, oukei," sê sy desperaat. "Gaan haal jy die onsigbaarheids-mantel, dan kry ons jou onder in Umbridge se gang."

Harry antwoord nie, maar storm uit die vertrek en stoot vir hom 'n pad oop deur die studente in die gange. Twee verdiepings verder kom hy op Septimus en Dean af, wat hom vrolik groet en vir hom vertel dat hulle 'n deurnagpartytjie in die geselskamer beplan om die einde van die eksamen te vier. Harry hoor hulle skaars. Hy skarrel deur die portretopening terwyl hulle nog stry oor hoeveel swartmark-Botterbiere nodig is, en klim weer deur met die onsigbaarheids-mantel en Sirius se mes in sy sak voor hulle besef dat hy weg was.

"Harry, sal jy 'n paar Galjoene bydra? Harold de Wet sê hy kan Vuurwhisky aan ons verkoop –"

Maar Harry laat spaander reeds in die gang af en spring 'n paar minute later met die laaste trappe af na waar Ron, Hermien, Ginny en Mania in 'n groepie aan die end van Umbridge se gang staan.

"Het dit," blaas hy. "Is julle reg?"

"Ja," fluister Hermien, terwyl 'n groep raserige sesdejaars verbystap. "Goed, Ron – gaan kry vir Umbridge. . . . Ginny, Mania, julle kan begin om mense uit die gang te keer. . . . Ek en Harry sal die mantel oorgooi en ons kans alwag. . . ."

Ron stap weg. Sy helderrooi hare is sigbaar tot aan die end van die gang, terwyl Ginny se blinkrooi kop en Mania se blonde kop in die teenoorgestelde rigting deur die wemelende studente vleg.

"Kom ons wag hier agter," prewel Hermien en trek vir Harry aan sy arm na 'n nis waar die lelike klipkop van 'n Middeleeuse

towenaar met homself staan en praat. "Is – is jy seker, jy's oukei, Harry? Jy's nog baie bleek."

"Ek's oukei," sê hy kortaf en trek die onsigbaarheidsmantel uit sy sak. Sy litteken pyn, maar nie so erg dat dit voel of Woldemort reeds vir Sirius die genadeslag toegedien het nie. Dit was baie seerder toe Woldemort vir Avery gestraf het . . .

"Hier," sê hy en gooi die onsigbaarheidsmantel oor hulle. Oor die klipkop se Latynse geprewel hoor hulle Ginny se stem.

"Julle kan nie hierlangs gaan nie!" skree sy vir die studente wat aangestap kom. "Jammer, julle moet met die swaaitrappes langs gaan. Iemand het Wurggas hier gegooi."

Hulle hoor mense protesteer en 'n klaerige stem sê: "Ek sien g'n gas nie."

"Dis omdat dit kleurloos is," sê Ginny in 'n oortuigend ergerlike stem. "Maar as jy daardeur wil stap, gaan gerus voort, dan het ons minstens jou lyk as waarskuwing vir die volgende idioot."

Die gedrang raak geleidelik minder. Dit lyk of die nuus oor die Wurggas vinnig versprei het, want spoedig kom daar nie meer studente met die gang langs nie.

Toe die area naby Umbridge se kantoor heeltemal leeg is, sê Hermien sag: "Dit is seker die beste wat ons gaan kry. Kom, Harry."

Hulle stap onder die mantel na die deur. Mania staan met haar rug na hulle onder in die gang. Toe hulle verby Ginny stap, fluister Hermien: "Mooi so . . . onthou ons teken!"

"Wat is die teken?" vra Harry toe hulle voor Umbridge se deur stop.

"Hulle gaan 'Weasley is ons Koning' uit volle bors sing as hulle Umbridge sien aankom," fluister Hermien. Harry steek die lem van Sirius se mes in die skreef tussen die deur en kosyn en die slot klik oop.

Die kantoor is heeltemal leeg en doodstil, net die katjies lê en bak in die laatmiddagson wat op die muurborde skyn. Hermien sug verlig.

"Ek was bang hier's dalk ekstra sekuriteit ná die tweede niffler."

Hulle gooi die mantel af en Hermien gaan staan voor die venster met haar towerstaf gereed voor haar. Harry skarrel na die vuurmaakplek, tel die flessie Floo-poeier op en sprinkel 'n knypie in die herd. Smaraggroen vlamme spring dadelik op. Hy kniel vinnig, steek sy kop in die dansende vlamme en skree: "Grimmauldplein 12!"

Sy kop begin dadelik tol asof hy pas van 'n mallemeule afgeklim het, hoewel sy knieë stewig op die koue kantoorvloer agterbly. Hy knyp sy oë toe teen die warrelende as tot die tollende sensasie

verby is. Toe hy sy oë oopmaak, kyk hy weer na die koue kelder-kombuis van Grimmauldplein.

Daar is niemand nie. Hy het dit verwag, maar hy was nie voorbereid op die vreeslike gevoel van angs en paniek wat hom beetpak toe hy die leë vertrek sien nie.

"Sirius!" skree hy. "Sirius, is jy hier?"

Sy stem weergalm deur die kombuis, maar daar is geen antwoord nie, behalwe 'n geritsel regs van die vuur.

"Wie's daar?" roep hy en wonder of dit 'n muis is.

Skepsel die huiself kruip uit. Hy lyk baie in sy skik oor iets. Dit lyk ook of hy onlangs sy hande lelik seergemaak het, albei is toegewikkel in verbande.

"Dis die Potter-seun se kop in die vuur," vertel Skepsel vir die leë kombuis. Hy kyk onderlangs triomfantlik na Harry en kyk weer vinnig weg. "Skepsel wonder hoekom hy hier is."

"Waar is Sirius, Skepsel?" vra Harry.

Die huiself gee 'n skor kekkellaggie.

"Meester is uit, Harry Potter."

"Waarheen is hy? Waarheen het hy gegaan, Skepsel?"

Skepsel kekkel bloot.

"Ek waarsku jou!" sê Harry terwyl hy goed weet hy kan niks aan Skepsel doen nie. "Wat van Lupin? Maloog? Is enigeen van hulle hier?"

"Hier is niemand behalwe Skepsel nie!" sê die elf vermakelig. Hy draai om en stap stadig na die kombuisdeur. "Skepsel wil 'n bietjie met sy mevrou gaan gesels. Hy het lanklaas, want Skepsel se meester hou hom weg van haar –"

"Waarheen het Sirius gegaan?" skree Harry op die elf. "Skepsel, is hy na die Departement vir Geheime?"

Skepsel steek in sy spore vas. Harry kan sy kaal kop net-net deur die dosyne stoelpote voor hom sien.

"Meester sê nie vir arme Skepsel waarheen hy gaan nie," sê die elf sag.

"Maar jy weet!" skree Harry. "Nie waar nie? Jy weet waar hy is?" Dis 'n rukkie stil, dan kekkel die elf hard.

"Meester sal nie terugkom van die Departement vir Geheime nie," sê hy in sy noppies. "Skepsel en sy mevrou is weer alleen."

Hy glip uit en verdwyn deur die portaaldeur.

"Jou –!"

Voor Harry 'n enkele vloek of belediging agterna kan slinger, pyn sy kop verblindend. Hy asem 'n klomp as in toe hy hoesend uit die vlamme geruk word. Die volgende oomblik staar hy op in professor Umbridge se bree, bleek gesig. Sy het hom aan die hare

uit die vuur gesleep en buig sy kop ver agteroor asof sy sy keel wil afsny.

“Het jy regtig gedink,” fluister sy en buig Harry se kop nog verder agteroor sodat hy na die plafon staar, “dat ek ná twee niiffers sal toelaat dat nog skorriemorries in my kantoor kom sonder dat ek dit weet? Ek het Loerpaljasse oor die deur uitgespreek, jou sot! Vat sy towerstaf,” blaf sy vir iemand wat Harry nie kan sien nie. Hy voel hoe ’n hand onder sy kleed in sy sak vroetel. “Hare ook.”

Harry hoor ’n worsteling by die deur en besef dat Hermien se towerstaf ook so pas afgevat is.

“Wat soek julle in my kantoor?” sê Umbridge en skud Harry so woës aan sy hare dat hy steier.

“Ek het – my Vuurslag kom haal!” kryns Harry.

“Leuenaar!” Sy skud hom nog ’n keer. “Jy weet goed jou Vuurslag is onder streng bewaking in die kerkers, Potter. Jou kop was in my vuur. Met wie het jy gekommunikeer?”

“Niemand –” sê Harry en probeer loskom. Hy voel hoe van sy hare loskom van sy kopvel.

“Leuenaar!” skree Umbridge. Sy slinger hom weg van haar en hy val teen die lessenaar. Hy sien dat Millicent Bulstrode vir Hermien teen die muur vaspen. Malfoy leun glimlaggend teen die vensterbank terwyl hy Harry se towerstaf in die lug opgooi en dit weer vang.

Daar is ’n opstootjie buite in die gang en heelparty groot Slibberins kom in met Ron, Ginny, Mania en – tot Harry se konsternasie – Neville, wat in Krabbe se greep is en lyk of hy besig is om te versmoor. Al vier se monde is toegebind.

“Het almal van hulle,” sê Warrington en stamp vir Ron rof vorentoe. “Daardie een,” hy wys met sy dik vinger na Neville, “het my probeer keer toe ek vir haar wou vang,” hy wys na Ginny, wat probeer om die groot Slibberin-meisie wat haar vashou se skene te skop, “toe bring ek hom ook sommer saam.”

“Mooi, mooi!” Umbridge kyk na die worstelende Ginny. “Wel, dit lyk asof Hogwarts binnekort ’n Weasley-lose sone gaan wees, nè?”

Malfoy lag hard en kruiperig. Umbridge gee haar breë selfvoldane glimlag, gaan sit op haar sisleunstoel en staar soos ’n padda in ’n blombedding na die gevangenes voor haar.

“So, Potter,” sê sy. “Jy het wagte om my kantoor geplaas en toe hierdie sot,” sy knik na Ron en Malfoy lag nog harder, “gestuur om vir my te sê dat die poltergeist amok maak in die Transfigurasie-departement – dit terwyl ek goed weet hy’s besig om ink aan die teleskope se oogstukke te smeer. Meneer Fillis het my kort tevore ingelig.

“Dit was duidelik vir jou belangrik om met iemand te praat. Was dit Albus Dompeldorius? Of daardie halfmens Hagrid? Ek twyfel of dit Minerva McGonagall was, ek hoor sy’s nog te siek om te praat.”

Malfoy en ’n paar van die ander lede van die Ondersoektaakmag lag hard. Haat en woede skiet so hetig deur Harry se lyf dat hy daarvan ruk.

“Dit het niks met jou uit te waai met wie ek gepraat het nie,” sis hy.

Umbridge se slap gesig verstyf.

“Goed dan,” sê sy in haar gevaarlikste vals soet stem. “Goed, meneer Potter. Ek het jou die geleentheid gegee om uit jou eie vir my te vertel. Jy het geweier. Ek het geen ander keuse as om jou te dwing nie. Draco – gaan roep vir professor Snerp.”

Malfoy steek Harry se towerstaf in sy kleed en stap grynsaggend uit, maar Harry sien hom skaars. Hy kan nie glo dat hy so dom was nie – hoe kon hy dit vergeet het? Hy het gedink al die lede van die Orde is weg, almal wat hom kan help om Sirius te red, maar daar is nog ’n lid van die Orde van die Feniks in Hogwarts – Snerp.

Dis stil in die kantoor behalwe ’n gevroetel en geskuifel soos die Slibberins sukkel om Ron-hulle te beheer. Ron se lip drup bloed op Umbridge se mat soos hy worstel teen Warrington se wurrgreep. Ginny probeer nog steeds om op die sesdejaarmeisie wat haar boarms stewig vashou se voet te trap, Neville stoei in Krabbe se arms terwyl sy gesig al perser word, en Hermien sukkel vergeefs om uit Millicent Bulstrode se greep te kom. Net Mania staan willoos langs haar gevangenemer en staar met ’n verveelde uitdrukking deur die venster.

Harry kyk weer na Umbridge, wat hom fyn dophou. Hy hou sy gesig met opset uitdrukkingloos toe voetstappe buite in die gang hoorbaar word. Draco Malfoy kom die vertrek binne, gevolg deur Snerp.

“Jy wou my sien?” sê Snerp vir Umbridge en sy oë speel onverkillig oor die worstelende studente.

“A, professor Snerp!” Umbridge glimlag breed en staan weer op. “Ja, ek wil nog ’n bottel Veritaserum hê. So gou moontlik, asseblief.”

“Jy’t my laaste bottel geneem om vir Potter te ondervra,” sê hy en staar koud na haar van onder sy gordyn vetterige hare. “Jy’t seker nie alles gebruik nie? Ek het vir jou gesê drie druppels is oorgenoeg.”

Umbridge bloos.

“Jy kan darem seker nog maak, of hoe?” sê sy in die stroperige stemmetjie wat sy altyd gebruik as sy kwaad is.

“Sekerlik.” Snerp se lip krul. “Maar dit neem ’n volle maansiklus om ryp te word. Ek sal dit oor ’n maand vir jou kan gee.”

“’n Maand?” kryns Umbridge en swel soos ’n brulpadda op. “’n Maand? Maar ek moet dit vanaand hê, Snerp! Ek het so pas ontdek dat Potter my vuur gebruik het om met iemand te kommunikeer!”

“Sowaar?” sê Snerp en lyk vir die eerste keer effens geïnteresseerd in wat om hom aangaan. “Wel, dit verbaas my nie. Potter was nog nooit geneë om skoolreëls na te kom nie.”

Sy koue, donker oë boor in Harry s’n, wat sy blik onverskrokke ontmoet terwyl hy hard op sy droom konsentreer en vir Snerp probeer dwing om sy gedagtes te lees, om te verstaan . . .

“Ek moet hom ondervra!” herhaal Umbridge woedend en Snerp kyk terug na haar. “Ek moet ’n towerdrankie hê om hom te dwing om die waarheid te praat!”

“Ek het reeds vir jou gesê,” sê Snerp afgemete, “dat ek nie voorraad het nie. Ek kan jou nie help nie, tensy jy vir Potter wil vergiftig – en ek verseker jou, ek sal dit verstaan. Die enigste probleem is dat die meeste gifstowwe te vinnig werk voor die slagoffer tyd het om iets te kan sê.”

Snerp kyk weer na Harry, wat nog steeds angstig probeer om woordeloos met hom te kommunikeer.

Woldemort het vir Sirius in die Departement vir Geheime gevang, dink hy desperaat. Woldemort het vir Sirius –

“Jy is op proef!” skree professor Umbridge. Snerp se wenkbroue lig effens. “Jy wil my met opset nie help nie! Ek het meer van jou verwag, Lucius Malfoy praat altyd met die grootste lof van jou! Trap uit my kantoor uit!”

Snerp buig ironies vir haar voor hy omdraai. Harry besef dis sy laaste kans om die Orde te laat weet wat aangaan.

“Hy’t vir Kussingvoet!” skree hy agter Snerp aan. “Hy’t vir Kussingvoet in die plek waar dit weggesteek word!”

Snerp steek vas met sy hand op Umbridge se deurknop.

“Kussingvoet?” skree Umbridge en kyk gretig van Harry na Snerp. “Wat is Kussingvoet? Waar word wat weggesteek? Wat bedoel hy, Snerp?”

Snerp kyk om na Harry. Sy gesig is onleesbaar. Harry weet nie of hy verstaan het of nie, maar hy durf dit nie waag om nog iets voor Umbridge te sê nie.

“Ek het nie ’n idee nie,” sê Snerp koud. “Potter, as ek wou hê jy moet onsin op my skree, sou ek vir jou ’n Brabbeldrankie gegee het. En Krabbe, kyk wat jy doen. As Loggerenberg versmoor, sal dit lastige ekstra papierwerk tot gevolg hê. En ek is bevrees ek sal dit op jou getuigskrif moet noem as jy eendag vir werk aansoek doen.”

Hy trek die deur agter hom toe. Harry weet nie wat om te dink

nie, Snerp was sy heel laaste kans. Hy kyk na Umbridge, wat lyk of sy net soos hy voel. Haar wange bewee van woede en frustrasie.

"Goed dan," sê sy en haal haar towerstaf uit. "Goed . . . ek het geen keuse nie . . . dis nie meer bloot 'n kwessie van skooldissipline nie . . . dis 'n geval van Ministerie-sekuriteit . . . ja . . . dis wat dit is . . ."

Dis of sy haarself probeer oorreed. Sy versit haar gewig rusteloos van een voet na die ander en staar na Harry terwyl sy haar oop hand met haar towerstaf raps en swaar asemhaal. Harry voel vreeslik magteloos sonder sy eie towerstaf.

"Jy dwing my, Potter . . . ek wil dit nie doen nie," sê Umbridge, wat nog steeds op een plek rondtrap, "maar soms regverdig omstandighede ongemagtigde optrede . . . Ek is seker die Ministerie sal verstaan dat ek geen keuse gehad het nie . . ."

Malfoy hou haar met 'n honger uitdrukking op sy gesig dop.

"Die Cruciatus-vloek behoort jou tong los te maak," sê Umbridge sag.

"Nee!" skree Hermien. "Professor Umbridge – dis onwettig!"

Maar Umbridge steur haar nie aan Hermien nie. Daar is 'n nare, gretige, opgewonde, trek op haar gesig soos Harry nog nooit tevore gesien het nie. Sy lig haar towerstaf.

"Die Minister sal niks daarvan hou as jy die wet oortree nie, professor Umbridge!" skree Hermien.

"Wat Cornelius nie weet nie, kan hom nie ontstig nie." Umbridge hyg effens na asem en rig haar towerstaf op verskillende dele van Harry se lyf asof sy probeer besluit waar dit die meeste pyn sal veroorsaak. "Hy weet nie dat ek verlede somer die Dementors beveel het om vir Potter te besoek nie, maar ek verseker jou, hy was baie in sy skik met die geleentheid om hom te skors."

"Dit was jy?" sê Harry. "Jy het die Dementors gestuur?"

"Wel, ons moes iets doen." Umbridge rig haar towerstaf op Harry se voorkop. "Hulle het almal gekerm oor hoe om jou stil te maak – hoe om jou te diskrediteer – maar ek was die enigste een wat iets daaromtrent gedoen het . . . Net jammer jy't jou daaruit gewikkel, nê, Potter. Maar nie vandag nie, nie weer nie –" Sy trek haar asem diep in en skree: "Cru-"

"NEE!" skree Hermien hees van agter Millicent Bulstrode. "Nee – Harry – ons sal vir haar móet sê!"

"Jy's mal!" skree Harry en staar na die stukkies van Hermien wat hy kan sien.

"Ons moet, Harry, sy gaan dit in elk geval uit jou dwing . . . en wat gaan dit ons help?"

Hermien begin swakkies huil teen die agterkant van Millicent Bulstrode se kleed. Millicent, wat haar nog die hele tyd teen die muur vaspen, gee onmiddellik pad en lyk gewalg.

"Wel, wel, wel," sê Umbridge triomfantlik. "Klein juffrou Bevraagteken-alles gaan vir ons 'n paar antwoorde gee. Komaan! Uit daarmee!"

"Aarg – nhee – nhee!" skree Ron wurgend deur sy muilband.

Ginny staar na Hermien asof sy haar vir die eerste keer sien. Neville, wat nog steeds na asem snak, gaap haar aan. Maar Harry het pas iets opgelet. Hoewel Hermien wanhopig in haar hande staan en huil, is daar nie 'n enkele traan te bespeur nie.

"Ek – ek is jammer, julle," snik Hermien, "maar – ek kan dit nie meer verduur nie –"

"Dis reg, dis reg!" sê Umbridge. Sy gryp Hermien aan die skouers, druk haar plat in die leunstoel en buk oor haar. "Nou goed . . . met wie het Potter nou net gepraat?"

"Wel," huil Hermien in haar hande, "hy het *probeer* om met professor Dompeldorius te praat."

Ron raak doodstil en sy oë word groot, Ginny probeer nie meer om op die Slibberin-meisie se tone te trap nie en selfs Mania lyk effens verbaas. Gelukkig is Umbridge en die Slibberins se aandag by Hermien en hulle merk niks van dié agterdogwekkende tekens nie.

"Dompeldorius?" sê Umbridge gretig. "Dan weet julle waar hy is?"

"Wel . . . nee!" snik Hermien. "Ons het Die Kokende Pot in Diagonaalstraat probeer en die Drie Besemstokke en selfs Die Swynenes –"

"Sotlike kind – asof Dompeldorius iewers in 'n kroeg sal sit terwyl die hele Ministerie na hom soek!" skree Umbridge, teleurstelling in elke plooi op haar breë gesig.

"Maar – maar ons moet iets belangriks vir hom sê!" kerm Hermien. Sy druk haar gesig nog dieper in haar hande. Harry weet dis nie van angs nie, maar omdat sy nie wil hê hulle moet sien dat sy nie 'n enkele traan stort nie.

"Ja?" sê Umbridge, skielik weer opgewonde. "Wat wil julle vir hom vertel?"

"Ons . . . ons moet vir hom sê dat dit g-gereed is!" sê Hermien gesmoord.

"Wat is gereed?" Umbridge gryp Hermien se skouers en skud haar hard. "Wat is gereed, kind?"

"Die . . . die wapen," stotter Hermien.

"Wapen? Wapen?" Umbridge se oë peul uit van opgewondenheid. "Dan het julle 'n soort wapen ontwikkel om teen die Ministerie te gebruik? Natuurlik volgens Dompeldorius se instruksies, nè?"

"J – j – ja," snak Hermien, "maar hy moes w-weggaan voor dit gereed was en n-n-nou moet ons vir hom sê dis klaar en ons k-kan hom n-n-nêrens kry nie!"

"Watter soort wapen is dit?" Umbridge se stomp vingers boor in Hermien se skouers.

"Ons weet nie m-mooi hoe dit werk nie," sê Hermien en snuif hard. "Ons het n-net gedoen w-wat professor Dompeldorius v-vir ons gesê het."

Umbridge kom voldaan orent.

"Gaan wys hierdie wapen vir my," sê sy.

"Ek gaan nie vir hulle wys nie," sê Hermien skril en loer deur haar vingers na die Slibberins.

"Dis nie vir jou om voorwaardes te stel nie," sê Umbridge vererg.

"Goed," snik Hermien weer in haar hande, "goed, laat hulle saamkom en sien. Ek hoop net hulle gebruik dit teen jou! Eintlik hoop ek hulle vra al die studente om ook te kom kyk! D-dit sal jou verdiende loon wees – ek sal daarvan hou as die hele sk-skool w-weet waar dit is en h-hoe om dit te gebruik. Dan kan hulle j-jou bykom as hulle vir jou kwaad is!"

Hierdie woorde het 'n magtige uitwerking op Umbridge. Sy kyk vinnig en ondersoekend na haar Onderzoektaakmag. Haar uitpeul-oë rus vir 'n oomblik op Malfoy, wat die uitdrukking van honger ambisie en gretigheid net-net nie gou genoeg van sy gesig afvee nie.

Umbridge kyk terug na Hermien. Dan sê sy in wat sy skynbaar dink 'n moederlike stem is: "Goed, liefie, dan's dit net ek en jy en ons neem vir Potter ook saam, nê? Toe nou, opstaan."

"Professor," sê Malfoy vinnig, "professor Umbridge, ek dink regtig 'n paar lede van die Onderzoektaakmag moet saamkom om te help met –"

"Ek is 'n ten volle gekwalifiseerde beampte van die Ministerie, Malfoy. Dink jy regtig ek kan nie twee tieners sonder towerstawwe beheer nie?" sê Umbridge skerp. "In elk geval, dit klink nie vir my of hierdie wapen iets is wat skoolkinders moet sien nie. Julle bly net hier tot ek terugkom en sorg dat nie een van hulle –" sy wys na Ron, Ginny, Neville en Mania – "ontsnap nie."

"Goed, Professor," sê Malfoy nors en teleurgesteld.

Umbridge rig haar towerstaf op Harry en Hermien. "Julle twee kan voor stap en vir my die pad wys. Toe, roer julle."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



FIGHT AND FLIGHT

Harry had no idea what Hermione was planning, or even whether she had a plan. He walked half a pace behind her as they headed down the corridor outside Umbridge's office, knowing it would look very suspicious if he appeared not to know where they were going. He did not dare attempt to talk to her; Umbridge was walking so closely behind them that he could hear her ragged breathing.

Hermione led the way down the stairs into the entrance hall. The din of loud voices and the clatter of cutlery on plates echoed from out of the double doors to the Great Hall. It seemed incredible to Harry that twenty feet away were people who were enjoying dinner, celebrating the end of exams, not a care in the world . . .

Hermione walked straight out of the oak front doors and down the stone steps into the balmy evening air. The sun was falling toward the

tops of the trees in the Forbidden Forest now as Hermione marched purposefully across the grass, Umbridge jogging to keep up. Their long dark shadows rippled over the grass behind them like cloaks.

"It's hidden in Hagrid's hut, is it?" said Umbridge eagerly in Harry's ear.

"Of course not," said Hermione scathingly. "Hagrid might have set it off accidentally."

"Yes," said Umbridge, whose excitement seemed to be mounting. "Yes, he would have done, of course, the great half-breed oaf . . ."

She laughed. Harry felt a strong urge to swing around and seize her by the throat, but resisted. His scar was throbbing in the soft evening air but it had not yet burned white-hot, as he knew it would if Voldemort had moved in for the kill. . . .

"Then . . . where is it?" asked Umbridge, with a hint of uncertainty in her voice as Hermione continued to stride toward the forest.

"In there, of course," said Hermione, pointing into the dark trees. "It had to be somewhere that students weren't going to find it accidentally, didn't it?"

"Of course," said Umbridge, though she sounded a little apprehensive now. "Of course . . . very well, then . . . you two stay ahead of me."

"Can we have your wand, then, if we're going first?" Harry asked her.

"No, I don't think so, Mr. Potter," said Umbridge sweetly, poking him in the back with it. "The Ministry places a rather higher value on my life than yours, I'm afraid."

As they reached the cool shade of the first trees, Harry tried to

catch Hermione's eye; walking into the forest without wands seemed to him to be more foolhardy than anything they had done so far this evening. She, however, merely gave Umbridge a contemptuous glance and plunged straight into the trees, moving at such a pace that Umbridge, with her shorter legs, had difficulty in keeping up.

"Is it very far in?" Umbridge asked, as her robe ripped on a bramble.

"Oh yes," said Hermione. "Yes, it's well hidden."

Harry's misgivings increased. Hermione was not taking the path they had followed to visit Grawp, but the one he had followed three years ago to the lair of the monster Aragog. Hermione had not been with him on that occasion; he doubted she had any idea what danger lay at the end of it.

"Er — are you sure this is the right way?" he asked her pointedly.

"Oh yes," she said in a steely voice, crashing through the undergrowth with what he thought was a wholly unnecessary amount of noise. Behind them, Umbridge tripped over a fallen sapling. Neither of them paused to help her up again; Hermione merely strode on, calling loudly over her shoulder, "It's a bit further in!"

"Hermione, keep your voice down," Harry muttered, hurrying to catch up with her. "Anything could be listening in here —"

"I want us heard," she answered quietly, as Umbridge jogged noisily after them. "You'll see . . ."

They walked on for what seemed a long time, until they were once again so deep into the forest that the dense tree canopy blocked out all light. Harry had the feeling he had had before in the forest, one of being watched by unseen eyes. . . .

“How much further?” demanded Umbridge angrily from behind him.

“Not far now!” shouted Hermione, as they emerged into a dim, dank clearing. “Just a little bit —”

An arrow flew through the air and landed with a menacing thud in the tree just over her head. The air was suddenly full of the sound of hooves. Harry could feel the forest floor trembling; Umbridge gave a little scream and pushed him in front of her like a shield —

He wrenched himself free of her and turned. Around fifty centaurs were emerging on every side, their bows raised and loaded, pointing at Harry, Hermione, and Umbridge, who backed slowly into the center of the clearing, Umbridge uttering odd little whimpers of terror. Harry looked sideways at Hermione. She was wearing a triumphant smile.

“Who are you?” said a voice.

Harry looked left. The chestnut-bodied centaur called Magorian was walking toward them out of the circle; his bow, like the others’, was raised. On Harry’s right, Umbridge was still whimpering, her wand trembling violently as she pointed it at the advancing centaur.

“I asked you who are you, human,” said Magorian roughly.

“I am Dolores Umbridge!” said Umbridge in a high-pitched, terrified voice. “Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic and Headmistress and High Inquisitor of Hogwarts!”

“You are from the Ministry of Magic?” said Magorian, as many of the centaurs in the surrounding circle shifted restlessly.

“That’s right!” said Umbridge in an even higher voice. “So be very careful! By the laws laid down by the Department for the Regulation

and Control of Magical Creatures, any attack by half-breeds such as yourselves on a human —”

“*What* did you call us?” shouted a wild-looking black centaur, whom Harry recognized as Bane. There was a great deal of angry muttering and tightening of bowstrings around them.

“Don’t call them that!” Hermione said furiously, but Umbridge did not appear to have heard her. Still pointing her shaking wand at Magorian, she continued, “Law Fifteen B states clearly that ‘Any attack by a magical creature who is deemed to have near-human intelligence, and therefore considered responsible for its actions —’”

“‘Near-human intelligence’?” repeated Magorian, as Bane and several others roared with rage and pawed the ground. “We consider that a great insult, human! Our intelligence, thankfully, far outstrips your own —”

“What are you doing in our forest?” bellowed the hard-faced gray centaur whom Harry and Hermione had seen on their last trip into the forest. “Why are you here?”

“*Your* forest?” said Umbridge, shaking now not only with fright but also, it seemed, with indignation. “I would remind you that you live here only because the Ministry of Magic permits you certain areas of land —”

An arrow flew so close to her head that it caught at her mousy hair in passing. She let out an earsplitting scream and threw her hands over her head while some of the centaurs bellowed their approval and others laughed raucously. The sound of their wild, neighing laughter echoing around the dimly lit clearing and the sight of their

pawing hooves was extremely unnerving.

“Whose forest is it now, human?” bellowed Bane.

“Filthy half-breeds!” she screamed, her hands still tight over her head. “Beasts! Uncontrolled animals!”

“Be quiet!” shouted Hermione, but it was too late — Umbridge pointed her wand at Magorian and screamed, “*Incarcerous!*”

Ropes flew out of midair like thick snakes, wrapping themselves tightly around the centaur’s torso and trapping his arms. He gave a cry of rage and reared onto his hind legs, attempting to free himself, while the other centaurs charged.

Harry grabbed Hermione and pulled her to the ground. Facedown on the forest floor he knew a moment of terror as hooves thundered around him, but the centaurs leapt over and around them, bellowing and screaming with rage.

“Nooooo!” he heard Umbridge shriek. “Nooooooo . . . I am Senior Undersecretary . . . you cannot . . . unhand me, you animals . . . noooooo!”

He saw a flash of red light and knew that she had attempted to Stun one of them — then she screamed very loudly. Lifting his head a few inches, Harry saw that Umbridge had been seized from behind by Bane and lifted high into the air, wriggling and yelling with fright. Her wand fell from her hand to the ground and Harry’s heart leapt, if he could just reach it —

But as he stretched out a hand toward it, a centaur’s hoof descended upon the wand and it broke cleanly in half.

“Now!” roared a voice in Harry’s ear and a thick hairy arm descended from thin air and dragged him upright; Hermione too had

been pulled to her feet. Over the plunging, many-colored backs and heads of the centaurs Harry saw Umbridge being borne away through the trees by Bane, still screaming nonstop; her voice grew fainter and fainter until they could no longer hear it over the trampling of hooves surrounding them.

“And these?” said the hard-faced, gray centaur holding Hermione.

“They are young,” said a slow, doleful voice from behind Harry.

“We do not attack foals.”

“They brought her here, Ronan,” replied the centaur who had such a firm grip on Harry. “And they are not so young. . . . He is nearing manhood, this one . . .”

He shook Harry by the neck of his robes.

“Please,” said Hermione breathlessly, “please, don’t attack us, we don’t think like her, we aren’t Ministry of Magic employees! We only came in here because we hoped you’d drive her off for us —”

Harry knew at once from the look on the face of the gray centaur holding Hermione that she had made a terrible mistake in saying this. The gray centaur threw back his head, his back legs stamping furiously, and bellowed, “You see, Ronan? They already have the arrogance of their kind! So we were to do your dirty work, were we, human girl? We were to act as your servants, drive away your enemies like obedient hounds?”

“No!” said Hermione in a horrorstruck squeak. “Please — I didn’t mean that! I just hoped you’d be able to — to help us —”

But she seemed to be going from bad to worse.

“We do not help humans!” snarled the centaur holding Harry, tightening his grip and rearing a little at the same time, so that Harry’s

feet left the ground momentarily. "We are a race apart and proud to be so. . . . We will not permit you to walk from here, boasting that we did your bidding!"

"We're not going to say anything like that!" Harry shouted. "We know you didn't do anything because we wanted you to —"

But nobody seemed to be listening to him. A bearded centaur toward the back of the crowd shouted, "They came here unasked; they must pay the consequences!"

A roar of approval met these words and a dun-colored centaur shouted, "They can join the woman!"

"You said you didn't hurt the innocent!" shouted Hermione, real tears sliding down her face now. "We haven't done anything to hurt you, we haven't used wands or threats, we just want to go back to school, please let us go back —"

"We are not all like the traitor Firenze, human girl!" shouted the gray centaur, to more neighing roars of approval from his fellows. "Perhaps you thought us pretty talking horses? We are an ancient people who will not stand wizard invasions and insults! We do not recognize your laws, we do not acknowledge your superiority, we are —"

But they did not hear what else centaurs were, for at that moment there came a crashing noise on the edge of the clearing so loud that all of them — Harry, Hermione, and the fifty or so centaurs filling the clearing — looked around. Harry's centaur let him fall to the ground again as his hands flew to his bow and quiver of arrows; Hermione had been dropped too, and Harry hurried toward her as two thick tree trunks parted ominously and the monstrous form of Grawp the giant

appeared in the gap.

The centaurs nearest him backed into those behind. The clearing was now a forest of bows and arrows waiting to be fired, all pointing upward at the enormous grayish face now looming over them from just beneath the thick canopy of branches. Grawp's lopsided mouth was gaping stupidly. They could see his bricklike yellow teeth glimmering in the half-light, his dull sludge-colored eyes narrowed as he squinted down at the creatures at his feet. Broken ropes trailed from both ankles.

He opened his mouth even wider.

"Hagger."

Harry did not know what "hagger" meant, or what language it was from, nor did he much care — he was watching Grawp's feet, which were almost as long as Harry's whole body. Hermione gripped his arm tightly; the centaurs were quite silent, staring up at the giant, whose huge, round head moved from side to side as he continued to peer amongst them as though looking for something he had dropped.

"*Hagger!*" he said again, more insistently.

"Get away from here, giant!" called Magorian. "You are not welcome among us!"

These words seemed to make no impression whatsoever on Grawp. He stooped a little (the centaurs' arms tensed on their bows) and then bellowed, "HAGGER!"

A few of the centaurs looked worried now. Hermione, however, gave a gasp.

"Harry!" she whispered. "I think he's trying to say 'Hagrid'!"

At this precise moment Grawp caught sight of them, the only two

humans in a sea of centaurs. He lowered his head another foot or so, staring intently at them. Harry could feel Hermione shaking as Grawp opened his mouth wide again and said, in a deep, rumbling voice, "Hermy."

"Goodness," said Hermione, gripping Harry's arm so tightly it was growing numb and looking as though she was about to faint, "he — he remembered!"

"HERMY!" roared Grawp. "WHERE HAGGER?"

"I don't know!" squealed Hermione, terrified. "I'm sorry, Grawp, I don't know!"

"GRAWP WANT HAGGER!"

One of the giant's massive hands swooped down upon them — Hermione let out a real scream, ran a few steps backward and fell over. Wandless, Harry braced himself to punch, kick, bite, or whatever else it took as the hand flew toward him and knocked a snow-white centaur off his legs.

It was what the centaurs had been waiting for — Grawp's outstretched fingers were a foot from Harry when fifty arrows went soaring through the air at the giant, peppering his enormous face, causing him to howl with pain and rage and straighten up again, rubbing his face with his enormous hands, breaking off the arrow shafts but forcing the heads in still deeper.

He yelled and stamped his enormous feet and the centaurs scattered out of the way. Pebble-sized droplets of Grawp's blood showered Harry as he pulled Hermione to her feet and the pair of them ran as fast as they could for the shelter of the trees. Once there they looked back — Grawp was snatching blindly at the centaurs as

blood ran all down his face; they were retreating in disorder, galloping away through the trees on the other side of the clearing. As Harry and Hermione watched, Grawp gave another roar of fury and plunged after them, smashing more trees aside as he went.

“Oh no,” said Hermione, quaking so badly that her knees gave way. “Oh, that was horrible. And he might kill them all . . .”

“I’m not that fussed, to be honest,” said Harry bitterly.

The sounds of the galloping centaurs and the blundering giant were growing fainter and fainter. As Harry listened to them his scar gave another great throb and a wave of terror swept over him.

They had wasted so much time — they were even further from rescuing Sirius than they had been when he had had the vision. Not only had Harry managed to lose his wand but they were stuck in the middle of the Forbidden Forest with no means of transport whatsoever.

“Smart plan,” he spat at Hermione, keen to release some of his fury. “Really smart plan. Where do we go from here?”

“We need to get back up to the castle,” said Hermione faintly.

“By the time we’ve done that, Sirius’ll probably be dead!” said Harry, kicking a nearby tree in temper; there was a high-pitched chattering overhead and he looked up to see an angry bowtruckle flexing its long twiglike fingers at him.

“Well, we can’t do anything without wands,” said Hermione hopelessly, dragging herself up again. “Anyway, Harry, how exactly were you planning to get all the way to London?”

“Yeah, we were just wondering that,” said a familiar voice from behind her.

Harry and Hermione moved instinctively together, peering through the trees, as Ron came into sight, with Ginny, Neville, and Luna hurrying along behind him. All of them looked a little the worse for wear — there were several long scratches running the length of Ginny's cheek, a large purple lump was swelling above Neville's right eye, Ron's lip was bleeding worse than ever — but all were looking rather pleased with themselves.

“So,” said Ron, pushing aside a low-hanging branch and holding out Harry's wand, “had any ideas?”

“How did you get away?” asked Harry in amazement, taking his wand from Ron.

“Couple of Stunners, a Disarming Charm, Neville brought off a really nice little Impediment Jinx,” said Ron airily, now handing back Hermione's wand too. “But Ginny was best, she got Malfoy — Bat-Bogey Hex — it was superb, his whole face was covered in the great flapping things. Anyway, we saw you heading into the forest out of the window and followed. What've you done with Umbridge?”

“She got carried away,” said Harry. “By a herd of centaurs.”

“And they left you behind?” asked Ginny, looking astonished.

“No, they got chased off by Grawp,” said Harry.

“Who's Grawp?” Luna asked interestedly.

“Hagrid's little brother,” said Ron promptly. “Anyway, never mind that now. Harry, what did you find out in the fire? Has You-Know-Who got Sirius or — ?”

“Yes,” said Harry, as his scar gave another painful prickle, “and I'm sure Sirius is still alive, but I can't see how we're going to get there to help him.”

They all fell silent, looking rather scared. The problem facing them seemed insurmountable.

“Well, we’ll have to fly, won’t we?” said Luna in the closest thing to a matter-of-fact voice Harry had ever heard her use.

“Okay,” said Harry irritably, rounding on her, “first of all, ‘we’ aren’t doing anything if you’re including yourself in that, and second of all, Ron’s the only one with a broomstick that isn’t being guarded by a security troll, so —”

“I’ve got a broom!” said Ginny.

“Yeah, but you’re not coming,” said Ron angrily.

“Excuse me, but I care what happens to Sirius as much as you do!” said Ginny, her jaw set so that her resemblance to Fred and George was suddenly striking.

“You’re too —” Harry began.

“I’m three years older than you were when you fought You-Know-Who over the Sorcerer’s Stone,” she said fiercely, “and it’s because of me Malfoy’s stuck back in Umbridge’s office with giant flying bogeys attacking him —”

“Yeah, but —”

“We were all in the D.A. together,” said Neville quietly. “It was all supposed to be about fighting You-Know-Who, wasn’t it? And this is the first chance we’ve had to do something real — or was that all just a game or something?”

“No — of course it wasn’t —” said Harry impatiently.

“Then we should come too,” said Neville simply. “We want to help.”

“That’s right,” said Luna, smiling happily.

Harry's eyes met Ron's. He knew that Ron was thinking exactly what he was: If he could have chosen any members of the D.A. in addition to himself, Ron, and Hermione to join him in the attempt to rescue Sirius, he would not have picked Ginny, Neville, or Luna.

"Well, it doesn't matter anyway," said Harry frustratedly, "because we still don't know how to get there —"

"I thought we'd settled that?" said Luna maddeningly. "We're flying!"

"Look," said Ron, barely containing his anger, "you might be able to fly without a broomstick but the rest of us can't sprout wings whenever we —"

"There are other ways of flying than with broomsticks," said Luna serenely.

"I s'pose we're going to ride on the back of the Kacky Snorgle or whatever it is?" Ron demanded.

"The Crumple-Horned Snorkack can't fly," said Luna in a dignified voice, "but *they* can, and Hagrid says they're very good at finding places their riders are looking for."

Harry whirled around. Standing between two trees, their white eyes gleaming eerily, were two thestrals, watching the whispered conversation as though they understood every word.

"Yes!" he whispered, moving toward them. They tossed their reptilian heads, throwing back long black manes, and Harry stretched out his hand eagerly and patted the nearest one's shining neck. How could he ever have thought them ugly?

"Is it those mad horse things?" said Ron uncertainly, staring at a point slightly to the left of the thestral Harry was patting. "Those ones

you can't see unless you've watched someone snuff it?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"How many?"

"Just two."

"Well, we need three," said Hermione, who was still looking a little shaken, but determined just the same.

"Four, Hermione," said Ginny, scowling.

"I think there are six of us, actually," said Luna calmly, counting.

"Don't be stupid, we can't all go!" said Harry angrily. "Look, you three" — he pointed at Neville, Ginny, and Luna — "you're not involved in this, you're not —"

They burst into more protests. His scar gave another, more painful, twinge. Every moment they delayed was precious; he did not have time to argue.

"Okay, fine, it's your choice," he said curtly. "But unless we can find more thestrals you're not going to be able —"

"Oh, more of them will come," said Ginny confidently, who like Ron was squinting in quite the wrong direction, apparently under the impression that she was looking at the horses.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because in case you hadn't noticed, you and Hermione are both covered in blood," she said coolly, "and we know Hagrid lures thestrals with raw meat, so that's probably why these two turned up in the first place . . ."

Harry felt a soft tug on his robes at that moment and looked down to see the closest thestral licking his sleeve, which was damp with Grawp's blood.

“Okay, then,” he said, a bright idea occurring. “Ron and I will take these two and go ahead, and Hermione can stay here with you three and she’ll attract more thestrals —”

“I’m not staying behind!” said Hermione furiously.

“There’s no need,” said Luna, smiling. “Look, here come more now. . . . You two must really smell . . .”

Harry turned. No fewer than six or seven thestrals were picking their way through the trees now, their great leathery wings folded tight to their bodies, their eyes gleaming through the darkness. He had no excuse now. . . .

“All right,” he said angrily, “pick one and get on, then.”

Veg of vlug

Harry kan hom nie voorstel wat Hermien in die mou voer nie en hy durf dit nie waag om met haar te praat nie. Hy's nie eens seker dat sy wel 'n plan het nie. Hy stap kort op haar hakke uit vrees dat Umbridge agterdogtig sal raak as sy besef dat hy nie weet waarheen hulle gaan nie. Umbridge is so na aan hulle dat hy haar gejaagde asemhaling kan hoor.

Hermien stap deur die gang en met die trappe af na die ingangsportaal. Die gedreun van stemme en klaterende messegoed weer-galm deur die Groot Saal se dubbeldeure. Harry kan skaars glo dat daar net 'n paar tree verder studente sit wat hul aandete geniet en die einde van die eksamens sorgeloos vier.

Hermien stap uit by die eikehoutdeure en af met die kliptrappe. Dis 'n heerlike soel laatmiddag. Die son sak net bo die bome van die Verbode Woud en terwyl Hermien doelgerig oor die gras stap – Umbridge moet draf om by te hou – rimpel hul skaduwees soos lang, donker mantels agter hulle oor die grasperk.

“Dis in Hagrid se hut, hm?” vra Umbridge gretig vir Harry.

“Natuurlik nie,” sê Hermien skerp. “Wat as Hagrid dit per ongeluk aktiveer?”

“Ja,” sê Umbridge, wie se opgewondenheid nou omtrent geen perke ken nie. “Natuurlik, dis net wat hy sal doen, die halfgebakte misgewas.”

Harry is lus om om te swaai en haar aan haar strot te gryp toe sy lag, maar hy betuël hom. Sy litteken klop in die loom aandlug, maar dit brand minstens nie witwarm nie. Hy weet dis wat sal gebeur sodra Woldemort oorgaan tot moord.

“Wel . . . waar is dit?” vra Umbridge effens onseker toe Hermien na die Woud stap.

“Daar binne, natuurlik,” sê Hermien ongeduldig en wys na die donker bome. “Dit moet tog iewers wees waar die studente dit nie per ongeluk in die hande kan kry nie, of hoe?”

"Natuurlik . . . nou ja, goed . . . bly julle twee net voor my." Umbridge klink skielik effens benoud.

"Kan ons jou towerstaf kry as ons voor moet loop?" vra Harry.

"Nee, Potter, ek dink nie so nie," sê Umbridge soet en steek hom in die rug daarmee. "Die Ministerie heg meer waarde aan my lewende as aan joune, sien."

Toe hulle in die eerste bome se koel skaduwee kom, probeer Harry om Hermien se aandag te trek. Om die Woud sonder towerstafte binne te stap, voel vir hom na die mees domastrante ding wat hulle nog vanaand gedoen het. Maar Hermien kyk bloot minagtend om na Umbridge voor sy so vinnig aanstap dat Umbridge met haar kort beentjies met moeite byhou.

"Is dit baie ver?" vra Umbridge toe haar kleed aan 'n braambos haak.

"O ja," sê Hermien, "ja, dis baie goed versteek."

Harry voel nog benouder. Hermien het nie die paadjie na Ghrop se skuilplek geneem nie, maar die een wat hy drie jaar gelede na die monster Aragog se lêplek gevolg het. Hermien was nie daar nie en hy twyfel of sy weet watter gevaar op hulle wag.

"Hm – is jy seker dis die regte pad?" vra hy doelgerig vir haar.

"O ja," sê sy in 'n besliste stem en bars heeltemal te raserig na Harry se sin deur die kreupelhout. Agter hulle struikel Umbridge oor 'n tak. Niemand wag vir haar of help haar op nie. Hermien stap bloot vinniger en skree oor haar skouer: "Dis nog 'n entjie verder!"

"Hermien, moenie so raas nie," brom Harry, wat haar probeer inhaal. "Netnou hoor iets ons –"

"Ek wil hê iets moet ons hoor," sê sy sag terwyl Umbridge met groot gedruis nader draf. "Wag net, jy sal sien . . ."

Hulle stap nog 'n lang ruk, tot hulle só diep in die Woud is dat die digte blaredak alle lig uitsluit. Harry het weer daardie gevoel wat hy al tevore in die Woud gehad het: dat onsigbare oë hulle dophou.

"Hoe ver nog?" skree Umbridge wild agter hulle.

"Nie meer ver nie!" skree Hermien toe hulle by 'n dofverligte oopte kom. "Nog net 'n klein entjie –"

'n Pyl vlieg deur die lug en tref die boom bo haar kop met 'n dowwe slag. Skielik is die lug gevul met die getrappel van hoewe en die Woudvloer bewe. Umbridge gee 'n gilletjie en hou Harry soos 'n skild voor haar.

Hy ruk hom los en kyk rond. Hulle is omsingel deur 'n stuk of vyftig sentours wat met gespanne boë na hulle mik. Die driestuks retireer stadig na die middel van die oopte terwyl Umbridge jammerlik kerm. Harry kyk sydelings na Hermien. Sy glimlag triomfantlik.

“Wie is julle?” vra ’n stem.

Harry kyk na links. Die kastainingbruin sentour genaamd Magorian tree uit die kring: nes die ander hou hy sy boog gereed voor hom. Umbridge, aan Harry se regterkant, kerm nog steeds jammerlik. Haar towerstaf bewe in die hand waarmee sy na die sentour wys.

“Ek het gevra wie jy is, mens,” sê Magorian skor.

“Ek is Dolores Jane Umbridge!” sê Umbridge in ’n skril, verskrikte stem. “Senior Ondersekretaresse vir die Minister vir Towerkuns en Skoolhoof en Hoë Ondersoeker van Hogwarts!”

“Jy is van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns?” sê Magorian en ’n klomp van die sentours trap rusteloos rond.

“Dis reg!” Umbridge se stem is nog skiller. “En julle moet in julle spoor trap! Volgens die wette, soos neergelê deur die Departement vir die Beheer en Kontrole van Magiese Kreature, word enige aanval deur halfmense soos julle op mense –”

“Wat het jy ons genoem?” skree ’n woeste swart sentour wat Harry as Bane herken. Daar word verwoed onderlangs gebrom en die boogsnare span stywer.

“Moenie skeldname gebruik nie!” sê Hermien kwaai, maar dit lyk nie of Umbridge haar hoor nie. Sy wys nog steeds met haar bewende towerstaf na Magorian.

“Wet Vyftien B stel dit duidelik dat enige aanval deur ’n magiese kreatuur van amper-menslike intellek, wat dus as verantwoordelik vir sy aksies beskou kan word, –”

“Amper-menslike intellek?” herhaal Magorian, terwyl Bane en ’n paar ander verwoed brul en met hul hoeve op die grond kap. “Ons beskou dit as ’n uiterste belediging, mens! Ons intelligensie is gelukkig baie hoër as julle s’n!”

“Wat maak julle in ons Woud?” bulder die grys sentour met die harde gesig wat Harry en Hermien die vorige keer in die Woud gesien het. “Wat soek julle hier?”

“Julle Woud?” sê Umbridge in ’n stem wat nou nie net van angs bewe nie, maar ook van verontwaardiging. “Ek moet julle herinner dat julle slegs hier kan bly omdat die Ministerie vir Towerkuns julle toelaat om sekere gebiede –”

’n Pyl vlieg so naby haar kop verby dat dit aan haar muisvaal hare raak. Sy skree oorverdowend en haar hande vlieg na haar kop terwyl die sentours daverend lag. Die geluid van hul wilde, runnikende gelag weergalm deur die dofverligte oopte en die driftige gekap van hul hoeve is angswekkend.

“Wie se Woud is dit nou, mens?” bulk Bane.

“Vieslike halfbloeders!” skree Umbridge, haar hande nog steeds oor haar kop. “Ondiere! Onbeheerbare gespuis!”

“Bly stil!” gil Hermien, maar dis te laat. Umbridge rig haar towerstaf op Magorian en skreeu: “Gevange neem!”

Toue vlieg soos dik slange uit die ruigtes, draai om die sentour se bolyf en pen sy arms vas. Hy brul van woede en steier op sy agterbene in ’n poging om los te kom, terwyl die ander sentours nader galop.

Harry gryp vir Hermien en druk haar gesig eerste teen die Woudvloer. Hoewe dreun om hulle en vlieg rakelings oor hul koppe, maar die sentours spring proesend van woede oor hulle.

“Neeeeee!” skree Umbridge. “Neeeeeeee ek is die Senior Ondersekretaresse julle kan nie los my, julle ondiere neeeee!”

Harry sien ’n rooi ligflits en besef dat sy probeer het om ’n sentour te Bedwelm. Dan gil sy luidkeels. Harry lig sy kop net genoeg om te sien hoe Bane vir Umbridge van agter optel en haar skoppend en skreeuend van vrees hoog in die lug hou. Haar towerstaf val op die grond. Harry se hart spring. As hy dit net in die hande kan kry –

Maar toe hy sy hand uitsteek, sit ’n sentour sy hoof daarop neer en dit breek middeldeer.

“Nou!” skree ’n stem in Harry se oor en ’n dik, harige arm kom van nêrens en trek hom orent. Hermien word ook opgetel. Harry sien oor die sentours se malende koppe en rûe hoe Bane ’n skreeuende Umbridge deur die bome wegdra. Haar stem word al flouër tot hulle haar nie meer oor die getrappel van hoewe kan hoor nie.

“En hierdie twee?” sê die grys sentour met die harde gesig wat vir Hermien vashou.

“Hulle is jonk,” sê ’n stadige, droewige stem agter Harry. “Ons val nie vullens aan nie.”

“Hulle het haar hierheen gebring, Ronan,” antwoord die sentour wat vir Harry beethet. “En hulle is nie meer so jonk nie. Hierdie een is al amper ’n man.”

Hy skud Harry aan sy kleed se nek.

“Asseblief,” hyg Hermien, “moet ons asseblief nie aanval nie. Ons is nie soos sy nie. Ons werk nie vir die Ministerie vir Towerkuns nie! Ons het net hierheen gekom omdat ons gehoop het julle sal haar vir ons wegjaag.”

Aan die trek op die grys sentour se gesig weet Harry dadelik dat Hermien ’n vreeslike fout gemaak het. Die grys sentour gooi sy kop agteroor, stamp die grond met sy agterpote en bulder. “Sien jy,

Ronan? Hulle het reeds die arrogansie van hul soort! Ons moet julle vuilwerk vir julle doen, hê, mensekind? Ons moet soos knegte optree, jul vyand soos gehoorsame honde verdryf?"

"Nee," sê Hermien geskok. "Asseblief – ek het dit nie so bedoel nie! Ek het net gehoop julle sal – ons help –"

Maar dit vererger alles net.

"Ons help nie mense nie!" snou die sentour wat vir Harry vashou. Hy verstewig terselfdertyd sy greep, rys op sy agterpote en lig Harry effens van die grond af. "Ons is 'n aparte ras en trots daarop. Ons sal nie toelaat dat julle hier wegstap en pronk met hoe ons vir julle geluister het nie!"

"Ons was nie van plan om dit te doen nie!" skree Harry. "Ons weet julle doen nie wat julle gedoen het omdat ons wil hê –"

Maar niemand luister na hom nie.

'n Bebaarde sentour agterin die skare skree: "Hulle het ongenooi hierheen gekom en moet die gevolge dra!"

'n Goedkeurende gebrul begroet hierdie woorde en 'n vaalbruin sentour skree: "Hulle kan by die vrou aansluit!"

"Maar julle het gesê julle maak nie die onskuldiges seer nie!" pleit Hermien. Hierdie keer loop regte tranes oor haar wange. "Ons het niks aan julle gedoen nie, ons het nie towerstawwe gebruik en julle gedreig nie! Ons wil net teruggaan skool toe, asseblief –"

"Ons is nie almal soos die verraaier Firenze nie, mensekind!" skree die grys sentour terwyl sy metgeselle goedkeurend runnik. "Of het jy dalk gedink ons is oulike pratende perdjies, hê? Ons is antieke wesens wat nie towenaars se inmenging en beledigings verduur nie! Ons erken nie julle wette nie, ons beskou julle nie as ons meederes nie, ons –"

Maar hulle sal nooit weet wat die sentours nog alles is nie, want op daardie oomblik hoor hulle 'n oorverdowende geluid aan die rand van die oopte. Dis so hard dat Harry, Hermien en die stuk of vyftig sentours omvlieg. Harry se sentour laat hom weer val en sy hande gryp na sy boog en koker. Hermien val ook op die grond en Harry skarrel na haar net toe twee dik boomstamme opsy gedruk word en Ghrop se monsteragtige gedaante in die spasie tussenin verskyn.

Die sentours naaste aan Ghrop retireer verbouereerd. Skielik is die oopte 'n see van pyle en boë wat op die massiewe grys gesig gerig word terwyl Ghrop van onder die digte blaredak na hulle gluur. Sy vertrekke mond hang dommerig oop sodat hulle sy geel baksteentande in die halflig sien glinster, sy dowwe modderkleurige oë is op skrefies getrek en stukkende toue sleep agter hom op die grond.

Hy maak sy mond groot oop.

"Hagger."

Harry is nie seker wat "hagger" beteken of watter taal dit is nie, en hy wil ook nie weet nie. Hy kyk na Ghrop se voete, wat amper so lank soos Harry se hele lyf is. Hermien hou sy arm styf vas. Die sentours staar roerloos na die reus, wie se groot kop van kant tot kant draai asof hy iets soek wat hy laat val het.

"Hagger!" sê hy weer, hierdie keer dringender.

"Gaan weg, reus!" roep Magorian. "Jy's nie welkom by ons nie!"

Dit lyk nie of hierdie woorde 'n indruk op Ghrop maak nie. Hy buk effens (die sentours se hande verstyf om hul boë) en brul: "HAGGER!"

'n Paar van die sentours lyk angstig, maar Hermien snak na asem.

"Harry!" fluister sy. "Ek dink hy probeer 'Hagrid' sê!"

Op daardie oomblik sien Ghrop hulle raak, die enigste twee mense in 'n see van sentours. Hy laat sak sy kop nog 'n entjie en tuur stip na hulle. Harry voel hoe Hermien bewe toe Ghrop weer sy mond wyd oopmaak en in 'n diep, rammelende stem sê: "Hemmie."

"Help!" Hermien lyk of sy gaan flou word. "Hy – hy onthou!"

"HEMMIE!" brul Ghrop. "WAA' HAGGER?"

"Ek weet nie," skree Hermien skril. "Ek is jammer, Ghrop, ek weet nie!"

"GHROP SOEK HAGGER!"

Die reus steek een van sy tamaai hande uit. Hermien skree, hardloop 'n paar tree weg en struikel. Harry, wat nie 'n towerstaf het nie, maak hom gereed vir slaan, skop, byt of wat ook al toe die reus se hand na hom swaai en 'n sneeuwit sentour uit die grond stamp.

Dis net waarvoor die sentours gewag het. Ghrop se uitgestrekte vingers is amper by Harry toe vyftig pyle deur die lug suis en die reus in die gesig peper. Hy kom skreeuend orent van woede en pyn. Hy vryf sy gesig met sy enorme hande, maar breek die pylstele af en dwing die pylpunte per ongeluk dieper in.

Hy skree en stamp sy kolossale voete en die sentours spat uitmekaar. Druppels bloed so groot soos klippers val op Harry terwyl hy vir Hermien ophelp en hulle so vinnig as wat hulle kan na die veiligheid van die digte bome hardloop. Toe hulle eers daar is, kyk hulle terug. Ghrop gryp blindweg na die sentours terwyl bloed oor sy gesig stroom. Die sentours val paniekerig terug en galop weg deur die bome aan die oorkant van die oopte. Ghrop brul verwoed en sit die sentours agterna terwyl hy die bome voor hom uitruk en wegslinger.

“O nee,” sê Hermien, wat so erg bewe dat sy skaars kan staan. “O, dis te aaklig. Wat as hy hulle almal doodmaak?”

“Dis hulle verdiende loon,” sê Harry bitter.

Die geluide van die galoppende sentours en die briesende reus word al dowwer. Harry se litteken ruk en ’n vlaag van angs spoel oor hom.

Hulle het soveel tyd gemors. Hulle is nóg verder daarvan om Sirius te red as toe hy die visioen gehad het. En boonop het hy nie net sy towerstaf verloor nie, maar is hulle in die middel van die Woud sonder enige vorm van vervoer.

“Oulike plan,” spoeg hy vir Hermien. “Baie slim. Wat maak ons nou?”

“Ons moet teruggaan kasteel toe,” sê Hermien.

“Teen daardie tyd is Sirius al lankal dood!” Harry skop verwoed na ’n boom. ’n Skril gebabbel bars bo sy kop los en toe hy opkyk, sien hy ’n briesende takkruiper wat met lang stokkiesvingers na hom wys.

“Wel, ons kan niks sonder ons towerstawwe doen nie,” sê Hermien radeloos. Sy stoot haarself op. “En in elk geval, Harry, hoe was jy van plan om in Londen te kom?”

“Ja, dis wat ons ook wil weet,” sê ’n bekende stem agter haar.

Harry en Hermien beweeg instinktief nader aan mekaar en tuur na die bome.

Ron verskyn, gevolg deur Ginny, Neville en Mania. Almal lyk ’n bietjie verrinneweer. Daar is lang krapmerke oor Ginny se wang, ’n groot pers knop bo Neville se regteroog en Ron se lip bloei erg, maar almal lyk baie in hul skik met hulself.

“So,” sê Ron. Hy stoot ’n lae tak uit die pad en hou Harry se towerstaf na hom uit. “Enige idees?”

Harry vat verlig sy towerstaf. “Hoe’t julle weggekom?”

“’n Paar Bedwelmers, ’n Ontwapenpaljas en Neville het ’n baie oulike Hindernis gedoen,” sê Ron luiters terwyl hy Hermien se towerstaf vir haar aangee. “Maar Ginny was fantasties. Sy’t vir Malfoy getakel – ’n Vermuisvloek. Dit was wonderlik, sy hele gesig was vol groot flappende goeters. In elk geval, ons het deur die venster gesien hoe julle Woud toe stap en julle agternagesit. Wat het julle met Umbridge gemaak?”

“Sy’s ontvoer,” sê Harry. “Deur ’n hele kudde sentours.”

“En hulle het julle hier gelos?” sê Ginny verstom.

“Nee, Ghrop het hulle weggejaag,” sê Harry.

“Wie is Ghrop?” vra Mania belangstellend.

“Hagrid se boetie,” sê Ron vinnig. “Maar dis nie nou belangrik.

nie. Harry, wat het jy in die vuur uitgevind? Het Jy-Weet-Wie vir Sirius of wat?"

"Ja," sê Harry en sy litteken prikkel weer pynlik. "Ek is seker Sirius leef nog, maar ek weet nie hoe ons daar gaan kom om hom te help nie."

Almal word stil. Dit lyk na 'n onoorkomelike probleem.

"Wel, ons sal moet vlieg, nè?" sê Mania, vir 'n verandering in 'n doodgewone stem.

"Hoor hier," sê Harry ergerlik, "eerstens gaan 'ons' niks doen nie. Jy moet jou glad nie hierby insluit nie. En tweedens, Ron is die enigste een met 'n besem wat nie deur 'n sekerheidstrol bewaak word nie, dus –"

"Ek het 'n besem!" sê Ginny.

"Ja, maar jy kom nie saam nie," sê Ron vinnig.

"Verskoon my, maar ek is net so bekommerd oor Sirius as julle!" Ginny se koppige uitdrukking laat haar skielik verbasend baie soos Fred en George lyk.

"Jy's te –" begin Harry, maar Ginny sê verwoed: "Ek's drie jaar ouer as wat jy was toe jy met Jy-Weet-Wie oor die towenaar se steen geveg het, en dis danksy my dat Malfoy in Umbridge se kantoor sit met vlermuise oral oor hom –"

"Ja, maar –"

"Ons was almal saam in die DS," sê Neville. "En die idee was om teen Jy-Weet-Wie te veg, of hoe? En dis ons eerste kans om iets te doen – of was dit alles net 'n soort speletjie?"

"Nee, natuurlik was dit nie –" sê Harry ongeduldig.

"Dan gaan ons saam," sê Neville. "Ons wil ook help."

"Dis reg," Mania glimlag gelukkig.

Harry kyk na Ron. Hy weet Ron voel nes hy: as hy kon kies water lede van die DS moet saamgaan om vir Sirius te red – behalwe natuurlik hyself, Ron en Hermien – sou dit beslis nie Ginny, Neville en Mania gewees het nie.

"Wel, dit maak in ieder geval nie saak nie," sê Harry gefrustreerd, "want ons weet nog nie hoe ons daar gaan kom nie –"

"Ek dag ons het klaar besluit," sê Mania. "Ons vlieg!"

"Luister," sê Ron, wat duidelik sy humeur met moeite betuël, "dalk kan jy sonder 'n besem vlieg, maar die res van ons kan nie vlerke groei net wanneer ons –"

"Daar is ander maniere om te vlieg as besems," sê Mania be-daard.

"Jy bedoel seker soos met 'n frommelklaphoring," sê Ron.

"Die frommelhoring-snorklap kan nie vlieg nie," sê Mania

plegtig, "maar hulle kan, en Hagrid het gesê hulle kan enige plek kry waarheen jy wil gaan."

Harry swaai om. Tussen die bome staan twee testralle met glinsterende wit oë. Hulle kyk na die fluisterende groepie asof hulle elke woord verstaan.

"Ja!" fluister hy en stap nader. Hulle gooi hul reptielagtige koppe agteroor en skud hul lang swart maanhare. Harry steek sy hand uit en streel die naaste testral se glansende nek. Hoe kon hy ooit gedink het hulle is lelik?

"Is dit daardie mal perdgoeters?" vra Ron onseker en staar iewers links van die testral wat Harry nou streel. "Daardie goed wat jy net kan sien as jy al gesien het hoe iemand die emmer skop?"

"Jip," sê Harry.

"Hoeveel?"

"Net twee."

"Wel, ons moet drie hê," sê Hermien, wat nog steeds bewurig lyk, maar ook baie vasberade.

"Vier, Hermien," sê Ginny fronsend.

"Ek dink daar is ses van ons," sê Mania kalm. Sy tel hulle.

"Moenie simpel wees nie, ons kan nie almal gaan nie," sê Harry ergerlik. "Luister, julle drie –" hy wys na Neville, Ginny en Mania, "julle's nie genooi nie, julle –"

Hulle begin dadelik teepraat en Harry se litteken trek pynlik saam. Elke oomblik wat hulle mors, is kosbaar, daar's nie tyd vir redekawel nie.

"Oukei, goed, dis julle besluit," sê hy kortaf, "maar tensy ons nog testralle kry –"

"O, daar sal wel nog kom," sê Ginny selfversekerd. Nes Ron staar sy ook na die verkeerde plek, oënskynlik onder die indruk dat sy na die perde kyk.

"Hoe weet jy?"

"Omdat, ingeval jy nie opgelet het nie, jy en Hermien vol bloed is," sê sy kil, "en ons weet almal Hagrid lok die testralle met rou vleis. Ek sou sê dis hoekom hierdie twee hier is."

Harry voel iets aan sy kleed rem en sien dat die naaste testral sy mou lek. Dis deurdrenk met Ghrop se bloed.

"Oukei, goed," sê hy toe 'n blink gedagte hom te binne skiet. "Ek en Ron sal solank gaan, dan bly Hermien hier by julle agter om nog testralle te lok –"

"Ek bly nie agter nie!" sê Hermien ergerlik.

"Dis nie nodig nie," sê Mania glimlaggend. "Kyk, daar kom nog, julle twee moet omtrent sleg ruik . . ."

Harry kyk om. Nog ses of sewe testralle kom deur die bome aangestap, hul leeragtige vlerke styf teen hul liggame gevou, hul oë glinsterend in die skemerdonker.

Hy het nie meer verskonings nie.

“Goed dan,” sê hy ergerlik. “Kry een en kom!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



THE DEPARTMENT OF MYSTERIES

Harry wound his hand tightly into the mane of the nearest thestral, placed a foot on a stump nearby and scrambled clumsily onto the horse's silken back. It did not object, but twisted its head around, fangs bared, and attempted to continue its eager licking of his robes.

He found there was a way of lodging his knees behind the wing joints that made him feel more secure and looked around at the others. Neville had heaved himself over the back of the next thestral and was now attempting to swing one short leg over the creature's back. Luna was already in place, sitting sidesaddle and adjusting her

robes as though she did this every day. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, however, were still standing motionless on the spot, openmouthed and staring.

“What?” he said.

“How’re we supposed to get on?” said Ron faintly. “When we can’t see the things?”

“Oh it’s easy,” said Luna, sliding obligingly from her thestral and marching over to him, Hermione, and Ginny. “Come here . . .”

She pulled them over to the other thestrals standing around and one by one managed to help them onto the backs of their mounts. All three looked extremely nervous as she wound their hands into the horses’ manes and told them to grip tightly before getting back onto her own steed.

“This is mad,” Ron said faintly, moving his free hand gingerly up and down his horse’s neck. “Mad . . . if I could just see it —”

“You’d better hope it stays invisible,” said Harry darkly. “We all ready, then?”

They all nodded and he saw five pairs of knees tighten beneath their robes.

“Okay . . .”

He looked down at the back of his thestral’s glossy black head and swallowed. “Ministry of Magic, visitors’ entrance, London, then,” he said uncertainly. “Er . . . if you know . . . where to go . . .”

For a moment his thestral did nothing at all. Then, with a sweeping movement that nearly unseated him, the wings on either side extended, the horse crouched slowly and then rocketed upward so fast and so steeply that Harry had to clench his arms and legs tightly

around the horse to avoid sliding backward over its bony rump. He closed his eyes and put his face down into the horse's silky mane as they burst through the topmost branches of the trees and soared out into a bloodred sunset.

Harry did not think he had ever moved so fast. The thestral streaked over the castle, its wide wings hardly beating. The cooling air was slapping Harry's face; eyes screwed up against the rushing wind, he looked around and saw his five fellows soaring along behind him, each of them bent as low as possible into the neck of their thestral to protect themselves from its slipstream.

They were over the Hogwarts grounds, they had passed Hogsmeade. Harry could see mountains and gullies below them. In the falling darkness Harry saw small collections of lights as they passed over more villages, then a winding road on which a single car was beetling its way home through the hills. . . .

"This is bizarre!" Harry heard Ron yell from somewhere behind him, and he imagined how it must feel to be speeding along at this height with no visible means of support. . . .

Twilight fell. The sky turned to a light, dusky purple littered with tiny silver stars, and soon it was only the lights of Muggle towns that gave them any clue of how far from the ground they were or how very fast they were traveling. Harry's arms were wrapped tightly around his horse's neck as he willed it to go even faster. How much time had elapsed since he had seen Sirius lying on the Department of Mysteries floor? How much longer would he be able to resist Voldemort? All Harry knew for sure was that Sirius had neither done as Voldemort wanted, nor died, for he was convinced that either

outcome would cause him to feel Voldemort's jubilation or fury course through his own body, making his scar sear as painfully as it had on the night Mr. Weasley was attacked.

On they flew through the gathering darkness; Harry's face felt stiff and cold, his legs numb from gripping the thestral's sides so tightly, but he did not dare shift positions lest he slip. . . . He was deaf from the thundering in his ears and his mouth was dry and frozen from the rush of cold night air. He had lost all sense of how far they had come, all his faith was in the beast below him, still streaking purposefully through the night, barely flapping its wings as it sped ever onward.

If they were too late . . .

He's still alive, he's still fighting, I can feel it. . . .

If Voldemort decided Sirius was not going to crack.

I'd know. . . .

Harry's stomach gave a jolt. The thestral's head was suddenly pointing toward the ground and he had actually slid forward a few inches along its neck. They were descending at last. . . . He heard one of the girls shriek behind him and twisted around dangerously but could see no sign of a falling body. . . . Presumably they had received a shock from the change of position, just as he had.

And now bright orange lights were growing larger and rounder on all sides. They could see the tops of buildings, streams of headlights like luminous insect eyes, squares of pale yellow that were windows. Quite suddenly, it seemed, they were hurtling toward the pavement. Harry gripped the thestral with every last ounce of his strength, braced for a sudden impact, but the horse touched the dark ground as

lightly as a shadow and Harry slid from his back, looking around at the street where the overflowing dumpster still stood a short way from the vandalized telephone box, both drained of color in the flat orange glare of the streetlights.

Ron landed a short way away and toppled immediately off his thestral onto the pavement.

“Never again,” he said, struggling to his feet. He made as though to stride away from his thestral, but, unable to see it, collided with its hindquarters and almost fell over again. “Never, ever again . . . that was the worst —”

Hermione and Ginny touched down on either side of him. Both slid off their mounts a little more gracefully than Ron, though with similar expressions of relief at being back on firm ground. Neville jumped down, shaking, but Luna dismounted smoothly.

“Where do we go from here, then?” she asked Harry in a politely interested voice, as though this was all a rather interesting day-trip.

“Over here,” he said. He gave his thestral a quick, grateful pat, then led the way quickly to the battered telephone box and opened the door. “Come *on!*” he urged the others as they hesitated.

Ron and Ginny marched in obediently; Hermione, Neville, and Luna squashed themselves in after them; Harry took one glance back at the thestrals, now foraging for scraps of rotten food inside the dumpster, then forced himself into the box after Luna.

“Whoever’s nearest the receiver, dial six two four four two!” he said.

Ron did it, his arm bent bizarrely to reach the dial. As it whirred back into place the cool female voice sounded inside the box,

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business.”

“Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger,” Harry said very quickly, “Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood . . . We’re here to save someone, unless your Ministry can do it first!”

“Thank you,” said the cool female voice. “Visitors, please take the badges and attach them to the front of your robes.”

Half a dozen badges slid out of the metal chute where returned coins usually appeared. Hermione scooped them up and handed them mutely to Harry over Ginny’s head; he glanced at the topmost one.

HARRY POTTER

RESCUE MISSION

“Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium.”

“Fine!” Harry said loudly, as his scar gave another throb. “Now can we *move*?”

The floor of the telephone box shuddered and the pavement rose up past the glass windows of the telephone box. The scavenging thestrals were sliding out of sight, blackness closed over their heads, and with a dull grinding noise they sank down into the depths of the Ministry of Magic.

A chink of soft golden light hit their feet and, widening, rose up their bodies. Harry bent his knees and held his wand as ready as he could in such cramped conditions, peering through the glass to see whether anybody was waiting for them in the Atrium, but it seemed to

be completely empty. The light was dimmer than it had been by day. There were no fires burning under the mantelpieces set into the walls, but he saw as the lift slid smoothly to a halt that golden symbols continued to twist sinuously in the dark blue ceiling.

“The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant evening,” said the woman’s voice.

The door of the telephone box burst open; Harry toppled out of it, followed by Neville and Luna. The only sound in the Atrium was the steady rush of water from the golden fountain, where jets from the wands of the witch and wizard, the point of the centaur’s arrow, the tip of the goblin’s hat, and the house-elf’s ears continued to gush into the surrounding pool.

“Come on,” said Harry quietly and the six of them sprinted off down the hall, Harry in the lead, past the fountain, toward the desk where the security man who had weighed Harry’s wand had sat and which was now deserted.

Harry felt sure that there ought to be a security person there, sure that their absence was an ominous sign, and his feeling of foreboding increased as they passed through the golden gates to the lifts. He pressed the nearest down button and a lift clattered into sight almost immediately, the golden grilles slid apart with a great, echoing clanking, and they dashed inside. Harry stabbed the number nine button, the grilles closed with a bang, and the lift began to descend, jangling and rattling. Harry had not realized how noisy the lifts were on the day that he had come with Mr. Weasley — he was sure that the din would raise every security person within the building, yet when the lift halted, the cool female voice said, “Department of

Mysteries,” and the grilles slid open again, they stepped out into the corridor where nothing was moving but the nearest torches, flickering in the rush of air from the lift.

Harry turned toward the plain black door. After months and months of dreaming about it, he was here at last. . . .

“Let’s go,” he whispered, and he led the way down the corridor, Luna right behind him, gazing around with her mouth slightly open.

“Okay, listen,” said Harry, stopping again within six feet of the door. “Maybe . . . maybe a couple of people should stay here as a — as a lookout, and —”

“And how’re we going to let you know something’s coming?” asked Ginny, her eyebrows raised. “You could be miles away.”

“We’re coming with you, Harry,” said Neville.

“Let’s get on with it,” said Ron firmly.

Harry still did not want to take them all with him, but it seemed he had no choice. He turned to face the door and walked forward. Just as it had in his dream, it swung open and he marched forward, leading the others over the threshold.

They were standing in a large, circular room. Everything in here was black including the floor and ceiling — identical, unmarked, handle-less black doors were set at intervals all around the black walls, interspersed with branches of candles whose flames burned blue, their cool, shimmering light reflected in the shining marble floor so that it looked as though there was dark water underfoot.

“Someone shut the door,” Harry muttered.

He regretted giving this order the moment Neville had obeyed it. Without the long chink of light from the torch-lit corridor behind

them, the place became so dark that for a moment the only things they could see were the bunches of shivering blue flames on the walls and their ghostly reflections in the floor below.

In his dream, Harry had always walked purposefully across this room to the door immediately opposite the entrance and walked on. But there were around a dozen doors here. Just as he was gazing ahead at the doors opposite him, trying to decide which was the right one, there was a great rumbling noise and the candles began to move sideways. The circular wall was rotating.

Hermione grabbed Harry's arm as though frightened the floor might move too, but it did not. For a few seconds the blue flames around them were blurred to resemble neon lines as the wall sped around and then, quite as suddenly as it had started, the rumbling stopped and everything became stationary once again.

Harry's eyes had blue streaks burned into them; it was all he could see.

"What was that about?" whispered Ron fearfully.

"I think it was to stop us knowing which door we came in from," said Ginny in a hushed voice.

Harry realized at once that she was right: He could no sooner have picked the exit from the other doors than located an ant upon the jet-black floor. Meanwhile, the door through which they needed to proceed could be any of the dozen surrounding them.

"How're we going to get back out?" said Neville uncomfortably.

"Well, that doesn't matter now," said Harry forcefully, blinking to try and erase the blue lines from his vision, and clutching his wand tighter than ever. "We won't need to get out till we've found Sirius."

—”

“Don’t go calling for him, though!” Hermione said urgently, but Harry had never needed her advice less; his instinct was to keep as quiet as possible for the time being.

“Where do we go, then, Harry?” Ron asked.

“I don’t —” Harry began. He swallowed. “In the dreams I went through the door at the end of the corridor from the lifts into a dark room — that’s this one — and then I went through another door into a room that kind of . . . glitters. We should try a few doors,” he said hastily. “I’ll know the right way when I see it. C’mon.”

He marched straight at the door now facing him, the others following close behind him, set his left hand against its cool, shining surface, raised his wand, ready to strike the moment it opened, and pushed. It swung open easily.

After the darkness of the first room, the lamps hanging low on golden chains from this ceiling gave the impression that this long rectangular room was much brighter, though there were no glittering, shimmering lights such as Harry had seen in his dreams. The place was quite empty except for a few desks and, in the very middle of the room, an enormous glass tank of deep-green water, big enough for all of them to swim in, which contained a number of pearly white objects that were drifting around lazily in the liquid.

“What’re those things?” whispered Ron.

“Dunno,” said Harry.

“Are they fish?” breathed Ginny.

“Aquavirius maggots!” said Luna excitedly. “Dad said the Ministry were breeding —”

“No,” said Hermione. She sounded odd. She moved forward to look through the side of the tank. “They’re brains.”

“*Brains?*”

“Yes . . . I wonder what they’re doing with them?”

Harry joined her at the tank. Sure enough, there could be no mistake now that he saw them at close quarters. Glimmering eerily, they drifted in and out of sight in the depths of the green water, looking something like slimy cauliflowers.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Harry. “This isn’t right, we need to try another door —”

“There are doors here too,” said Ron, pointing around the walls. Harry’s heart sank; how big was this place?

“In my dream I went through that dark room into the second one,” he said. “I think we should go back and try from there.”

So they hurried back into the dark, circular room; the ghostly shapes of the brains were now swimming before Harry’s eyes instead of the blue candle flames.

“Wait!” said Hermione sharply, as Luna made to close the door of the brain room behind them. “*Flagrate!*”

She drew with her wand in midair and a fiery X appeared on the door. No sooner had the door clicked shut behind them than there was a great rumbling, and once again the wall began to revolve very fast, but now there was a great red-gold blur in amongst the faint blue, and when all became still again, the fiery cross still burned, showing the door they had already tried.

“Good thinking,” said Harry. “Okay, let’s try this one —”

Again he strode directly at the door facing him and pushed it open,

his wand still raised, the others at his heels.

This room was larger than the last, dimly lit and rectangular, and the center of it was sunken, forming a great stone pit some twenty feet below them. They were standing on the topmost tier of what seemed to be stone benches running all around the room and descending in steep steps like an amphitheater, or the courtroom in which Harry had been tried by the Wizengamot. Instead of a chained chair, however, there was a raised stone dais in the center of the lowered floor, and upon this dais stood a stone archway that looked so ancient, cracked, and crumbling that Harry was amazed the thing was still standing. Unsupported by any surrounding wall, the archway was hung with a tattered black curtain or veil which, despite the complete stillness of the cold surrounding air, was fluttering very slightly as though it had just been touched.

“Who’s there?” said Harry, jumping down onto the bench below. There was no answering voice, but the veil continued to flutter and sway.

“Careful!” whispered Hermione.

Harry scrambled down the benches one by one until he reached the stone bottom of the sunken pit. His footsteps echoed loudly as he walked slowly toward the dais. The pointed archway looked much taller from where he stood now than when he had been looking down on it from above. Still the veil swayed gently, as though somebody had just passed through it.

“Sirius?” Harry spoke again, but much more quietly now that he was nearer.

He had the strangest feeling that there was someone standing right

behind the veil on the other side of the archway. Gripping his wand very tightly, he edged around the dais, but there was nobody there. All that could be seen was the other side of the tattered black veil.

“Let’s go,” called Hermione from halfway up the stone steps. “This isn’t right, Harry, come on, let’s go . . .”

She sounded scared, much more scared than she had in the room where the brains swam, yet Harry thought the archway had a kind of beauty about it, old though it was. The gently rippling veil intrigued him; he felt a very strong inclination to climb up on the dais and walk through it.

“Harry, let’s go, okay?” said Hermione more forcefully.

“Okay,” he said, but he did not move. He had just heard something. There were faint whispering, murmuring noises coming from the other side of the veil.

“What are you saying?” he said very loudly, so that the words echoed all around the surrounding stone benches.

“Nobody’s talking, Harry!” said Hermione, now moving over to him.

“Someone’s whispering behind there,” he said, moving out of her reach and continuing to frown at the veil. “Is that you, Ron?”

“I’m here, mate,” said Ron, appearing around the side of the archway.

“Can’t anyone else hear it?” Harry demanded, for the whispering and murmuring was becoming louder; without really meaning to put it there, he found his foot was on the dais.

“I can hear them too,” breathed Luna, joining them around the side of the archway and gazing at the swaying veil. “There are people *in*

there!”

“What do you mean, ‘*in there*’?” demanded Hermione, jumping down from the bottom step and sounding much angrier than the occasion warranted. “There isn’t any ‘*in there*,’ it’s just an archway, there’s no room for anybody to be there — Harry, stop it, come away —”

She grabbed his arm and pulled, but he resisted.

“Harry, we are supposed to be here for Sirius!” she said in a high-pitched, strained voice.

“Sirius,” Harry repeated, still gazing, mesmerized, at the continuously swaying veil. “Yeah . . .”

And then something slid back into place in his brain: Sirius, captured, bound, and tortured, and he was staring at this archway.

He took several paces back from the dais and wrenched his eyes from the veil.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to — well, come on, then!” said Hermione, and she led the way back around the dais. On the other side, Ginny and Neville were staring, apparently entranced, at the veil too. Without speaking, Hermione took hold of Ginny’s arm, Ron Neville’s, and they marched them firmly back to the lowest stone bench and clambered all the way back up to the door.

“What d’you reckon that arch was?” Harry asked Hermione as they regained the dark circular room.

“I don’t know, but whatever it was, it was dangerous,” she said firmly, again inscribing a fiery cross upon the door.

Once more the wall spun and became still again. Harry

approached a door at random and pushed. It did not move.

“What’s wrong?” said Hermione.

“It’s . . . locked . . .” said Harry, throwing his weight at the door, but it did not budge.

“This is it, then, isn’t it?” said Ron excitedly, joining Harry in the attempt to force the door open. “Bound to be!”

“Get out of the way!” said Hermione sharply. She pointed her wand at the place where a lock would have been on an ordinary door and said, “*Alohomora!*”

Nothing happened.

“Sirius’s knife!” said Harry, and he pulled it out from inside his robes and slid it into the crack between the door and the wall. The others all watched eagerly as he ran it from top to bottom, withdrew it, and then flung his shoulder again at the door. It remained as firmly shut as ever. What was more, when Harry looked down at the knife, he saw that the blade had melted.

“Right, we’re leaving that room,” said Hermione decisively.

“But what if that’s the one?” said Ron, staring at it with a mixture of apprehension and longing.

“It can’t be, Harry could get through all the doors in his dream,” said Hermione, marking the door with another fiery cross as Harry replaced the now-useless handle of Sirius’s knife in his pocket.

“You know what could be in there?” said Luna eagerly, as the wall started to spin yet again.

“Something blibbering, no doubt,” said Hermione under her breath, and Neville gave a nervous little laugh.

The wall slid back to a halt and Harry, with a feeling of increasing

desperation, pushed the next door open.

"This is it!"

He knew it at once by the beautiful, dancing, diamond-sparkling light. As Harry's eyes became more accustomed to the brilliant glare he saw clocks gleaming from every surface, large and small, grandfather and carriage, hanging in spaces between the bookcases or standing on desks ranging the length of the room, so that a busy, relentless ticking filled the place like thousands of minuscule, marching footsteps. The source of the dancing, diamond-bright light was a towering crystal bell jar that stood at the far end of the room.

"This way!"

Harry's heart was pumping frantically now that he knew they were on the right track. He led the way forward down the narrow space between the lines of the desks, heading, as he had done in his dream, for the source of the light, the crystal bell jar quite as tall as he was that stood on a desk and appeared to be full of a billowing, glittering wind.

"Oh look!" said Ginny, as they drew nearer, pointing at the very heart of the bell jar.

Drifting along in the sparkling current inside was a tiny, jewel-bright egg. As it rose in the jar it cracked open and a hummingbird emerged, which was carried to the very top of the jar, but as it fell on the draft, its feathers became bedraggled and damp again, and by the time it had been borne back to the bottom of the jar it had been enclosed once more in its egg.

"Keep going!" said Harry sharply, because Ginny showed signs of wanting to stop and watch the egg's progress back into a bird.

“You dawdled enough by that old arch!” she said crossly, but followed him past the bell jar to the only door behind it.

“This is it,” Harry said again, and his heart was now pumping so hard and fast he felt it must interfere with his speech. “It’s through here —”

He glanced around at them all. They had their wands out and looked suddenly serious and anxious. He looked back at the door and pushed. It swung open.

They were there, they had found the place: high as a church and full of nothing but towering shelves covered in small, dusty, glass orbs. They glimmered dully in the light issuing from more candle brackets set at intervals along the shelves. Like those in the circular room behind them, their flames were burning blue. The room was very cold.

Harry edged forward and peered down one of the shadowy aisles between two rows of shelves. He could not hear anything nor see the slightest sign of movement.

“You said it was row ninety-seven,” whispered Hermione.

“Yeah,” breathed Harry, looking up at the end of the closest row. Beneath the branch of blue-glowing candles protruding from it glimmered the silver figure 53.

“We need to go right, I think,” whispered Hermione, squinting to the next row. “Yes . . . that’s fifty-four. . . ”

“Keep your wands out,” Harry said softly.

They crept forward, staring behind them as they went on down the long alleys of shelves, the farther ends of which were in near total darkness. Tiny, yellowing labels had been stuck beneath each glass

orb on the shelf. Some of them had a weird, liquid glow; others were as dull and dark within as blown lightbulbs.

They passed row eighty-four . . . eighty-five . . . Harry was listening hard for the slightest sound of movement, but Sirius might be gagged now, or else unconscious . . . *or*, said an unbidden voice inside his head, *he might already be dead*. . .

I'd have felt it, he told himself, his heart now hammering against his Adam's apple. *I'd already know*. . .

"Ninety-seven!" whispered Hermione.

They stood grouped around the end of the row, gazing down the alley beside it. There was nobody there.

"He's right down at the end," said Harry, whose mouth had become slightly dry. "You can't see properly from here . . ."

And he led them forward, between the towering rows of glass balls, some of which glowed softly as they passed. . .

"He should be near here," whispered Harry, convinced that every step was going to bring the ragged form of Sirius into view upon the darkened floor. "Anywhere here . . . really close . . ."

"Harry?" said Hermione tentatively, but he did not want to respond. His mouth was very dry now.

"Somewhere about . . . here . . ." he said.

They had reached the end of the row and emerged into more dim candlelight. There was nobody there at all. All was echoing, dusty silence.

"He might be . . ." Harry whispered hoarsely, peering down the alley next door. "Or maybe . . ." He hurried to look down the one beyond that.

“Harry?” said Hermione again.

“What?” he snarled.

“I . . . I don’t think Sirius is here.”

Nobody spoke. Harry did not want to look at any of them. He felt sick. He did not understand why Sirius was not here. He had to be here. This was where he, Harry, had seen him. . . .

He ran up the space at the end of the rows, staring down them. Empty aisle after empty aisle flickered past. He ran the other way, back past his staring companions. There was no sign of Sirius anywhere, nor any hint of a struggle.

“Harry?” Ron called.

“What?”

He did not want to hear what Ron had to say, did not want to hear Ron tell him he had been stupid, or suggest that they ought to go back to Hogwarts. But the heat was rising in his face and he felt as though he would like to skulk down here in the darkness for a long while before facing the brightness of the Atrium above and the others’ accusing stares. . . .

“Have you seen this?” said Ron.

“What?” said Harry, but eagerly this time — it had to be a sign that Sirius had been there, a clue — he strode back to where they were all standing, a little way down row ninety-seven, but found nothing except Ron staring at one of the dusty glass spheres on the shelves.

“What?” Harry repeated glumly.

“It’s — it’s got your name on,” said Ron.

Harry moved a little closer. Ron was pointing at one of the small glass spheres that glowed with a dull inner light, though it was very

dusty and appeared not to have been touched for many years.

“My name?” said Harry blankly.

He stepped forward. Not as tall as Ron, he had to crane his neck to read the yellowish label affixed to the shelf right beneath the dusty glass ball. In spidery writing was written a date of some sixteen years previously, and below that:

S. P. T. to A. P. W. B. D.

Dark Lord

and (?) Harry Potter

Harry stared at it.

“What is it?” Ron asked, sounding unnerved. “What’s your name doing down here?”

He glanced along at the other labels on that stretch of shelf.

“I’m not here,” he said, sounding perplexed. “None of the rest of us are here . . .”

“Harry, I don’t think you should touch it,” said Hermione sharply, as he stretched out his hand.

“Why not?” he said. “It’s something to do with me, isn’t it?”

“Don’t, Harry,” said Neville suddenly. Harry looked around at him. Neville’s round face was shining slightly with sweat. He looked as though he could not take much more suspense.

“It’s got my name on,” said Harry.

And feeling slightly reckless, he closed his fingers around the dusty ball’s surface. He had expected it to feel cold, but it did not. On the contrary, it felt as though it had been lying in the sun for hours, as

though the glow of light within was warming it. Expecting, even hoping, that something dramatic was going to happen, something exciting that might make their long and dangerous journey worthwhile after all, he lifted the glass ball down from its shelf and stared at it.

Nothing whatsoever happened. The others moved in closer around Harry, gazing at the orb as he brushed it free of the clogging dust.

And then, from right behind them, a drawling voice said, "Very good, Potter. Now turn around, nice and slowly, and give that to me."

Die Departement vir Geheime

Harry wikkel sy vingers in die naaste testral se maanhare, sit sy voet op 'n boomstomp en klouter lomp op die perd se sysagte rug. Die testral steier nie, maar kyk met ontblote slagtrade om en probeer Harry se kleed lek.

Harry vind gou 'n manier om sy knieë agter die vlerke in te haak sodat hy stewig sit. Hy kyk om na die ander. Neville het hom oor die volgende testral se rug gegooi en probeer nou om 'n kort been oor die perd se agterstewe te swaai. Mania sit reeds vrouestyl op haar testral en trek haar kleed reg asof dit niks nuuts is nie. Ron, Hermien en Ginny staan nog steeds doodstil. Hul monde hang oop, en hulle staar voor hulle uit.

“Wat makeer?” sê Harry.

“Hoe moet ons miskien opklim?” sê Ron. “Ons kan nie die goed sien nie, oukei?”

“O, dis maklik.” Mania glip van haar testral se rug af en wink hulle nader. “Kom hier . . .”

Sy neem hulle tot by die ander testralle en help hulle om op te klim. Al drie lyk baie senuagtig toe sy hul vingers deur die maanhare ryg en vir hulle sê om styf vas te hou voor sy weer op haar testral klim.

“Dis malligheid,” sê Ron en stryk sy vry hand skrikkerig op en af teen die testral se nek. “Malligheid . . . as ek hulle net kon sien —”

“Jy moet eerder hoop hulle bly onsigbaar,” sê Harry. “Is julle gereed?”

Almal knik en Harry sien hoe vyf pare knieë onder hul mantels verstyf.

“Oukei . . .” Harry kyk na sy testral se glansende swart kop en sluk. “Die Ministerie vir Towerkuns, besoekersingang, Londen,” sê hy onseker. “Hm . . . dis nou mits jy weet waarheen om te gaan . . .”

'n Rukkie lank doen Harry se testral niks. Toe, met 'n swiepende beweging wat Harry amper laat afval, gaan die vlerke aan weers-

kante van die swart liggaam oop en dis of die perd hurk. Hy skiet in die lug op, so vinnig en teen so 'n steil helling dat Harry sy arms en bene styf om die testral moet slaan om nie agter af te val nie. Hy knyp sy oë toe en druk sy gesig in die sygladde maanhare. Hulle bars deur die Woud se blaredak en vlieg 'n bloedrooi sonsondergang tegemoet.

Hulle vlieg baie vinniger as wat Harry nog ooit beweeg het. Die testral skeer oor die kasteel feitlik sonder om sy groot vlerke te klap. Die koue lug raps Harry se gesig en sy oë is op skrefies getrek teen die wind wat verbyjaag. Hy loer na sy vyf maats rondom hom. Almal lê plat teen hul testralle se nekke om die volgstroom te ontsnap.

Hulle seil oor Hogwarts en oor Hogsmeade. Harry sien berge en valleie ver onder hom. Die daglig word swakker en spoedig is klein ligpuntjies die enigste tekens van die dorpies ver onder hulle. Daar kronkel 'n pad waarlangs 'n enkele motor huis toe deur die heuwels ry.

“Dis malligheid!” hoor Harry Ron dofweg agter hom skree. Hy probeer hom voorstel hoe dit moet voel om op hierdie hoogte, sonder enige sigbare ondersteuning, deur die lug te trek.

Dit word skemer en die lug word 'n sagte dofpers, besprinkel met silwer sterretjies. Kort hierna kan hulle net aan die verligte Moggeldorpies onder hulle sien hoe hoog hulle bo die grond is en hoe vinnig hulle vlieg. Harry klou aan sy testral se nek vas en wens die dier kon nog vinniger vlieg. Hoeveel tyd is reeds verby sedert hy vir Sirius op die vloer in die Departement vir Geheime sien lê het? Hoe lank kan Sirius nog vir Woldemort afweer? Al waarvan Harry seker is, is dat sy peetpa nog nie vir Woldemort gehoorsaam het nie en ook nog nie dood is nie. Hy weet hy sal Woldemort se vreugde of woede deur sy liggaam voel bruis en dat sy litteken sal pyn soos die nag toe meneer Weasley aangeval is.

Hulle vlieg voort deur die groeiende donkerte. Harry se gesig is styf en koud, sy bene, wat om die testral se lyf geslaan is, voel lam, maar hy kan nie van posisie verander nie uit vrees dat hy sal afval. Hy kan niks hoor bo die gedruis van die wind in sy ore nie en sy mond is droog en koud van die snerpende wind. Hy weet glad nie hoe ver hulle al gereis het nie. Hy maak eenvoudig op die dier onder hom staat, wat nog steeds doelgerig deur die stil nag vlieg amper sonder om sy vlerke te klap.

Sê nou hulle is te laat . . .

Hy lewe nog, hy sit hom teë, ek kan dit voel.

Sê nou Woldemort besluit Sirius gaan nie bes gee nie . . .

Ek sal weet.

Harry se maag draai. Die testral het sy kop skielik laat sak en pyl op die aarde af sodat Harry 'n ent oor sy nek skuif. Hulle is uiteindelik besig om te daal. . . . hy verbeel hom hy hoor 'n kreet agter hom en kyk angstig om. Hy sien nie 'n vallende liggaam nie, maar dis duidelik dat die ander ook groot geskrik het toe hulle van koers verander het.

Nou word die oranje ligte onder hulle groter en helderder. Hulle sien die bokante van geboue, die bane van motors se hoofligte soos gloeiende insekoe, blokkies geel lig wat vensters is. Dit lyk skielik of hulle op die sypaadjie afpyl. Harry klou met al sy krag en staal hom vir die impak van die landing, maar die testral vat so lig soos 'n skaduwee grond. Harry gly van sy rug af en staar na die straat waar die oorvol vullisbak nog steeds naby die beskadigde telefoonhokkie staan. Albei lyk kleurloos in die oranje gloed van die straatligte.

Ron se testral land 'n entjie verder en Ron tuimel grond toe.

"Nooit weer nie," sê hy toe hy orent sukkel. Hy probeer wegstap, maar loop in die testral se agterstewe vas en slaan amper weer neer. "Nooit, ooit weer nie . . . dit was verskriklik!"

Hermien en Ginny se testralle land aan weerskante van Ron. Hulle gly met effens meer grasie as Ron van die perde af, maar met dieselfde uitroepe van verligting noudat daar weer vaste grond onder hul voete is. Neville spring ook bewend af en Mania klim behendig af.

"Waarheen gaan ons nou?" vra sy vir Harry in 'n beskaafde stem asof dit bloot 'n interessante daguitstappie is.

"Hiernatoe." Harry gee sy testral 'n dankbare kloppie teen die nek voor hy sy maats na die verrinnuweerde telefoonhokkie lei en die deur oopmaak. "Toe, gaan in!" sê hy toe hulle aarsel.

Ron en Ginny stap gedwee in en Hermien, Neville en Mania bondel agterna. Harry kyk vir oulaas na die testralle wat nou in die vullisbak na verrotte oorskietkos soek voor hy vir Mania volg.

"Wie ook al naaste aan die telefoon is, skakel ses twee vier vier tweel!" sê hy.

Ron maak so, sy arm teen 'n skewe hoek gedraai om by die draai-skyf te kom. Die skyf draai terug en die koel vrouestem weerklink deur die hokkie.

"Welkom by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns. Vermeld asseblief jou naam en die doel van jou besoek."

"Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermien la Grange," sê Harry baie vinnig. "Ginny Weasley, Neville Loggerenberg, Mania Goedlieb hier om iemand te red, tensy die Ministerie dit reeds gedoen het!"

"Dankie," sê die koel vrouestem. "Besoekers, neem asseblief die lapelbalkies en speld dit vooraan jul klede vas."

'n Halfdosyn lapelbalkies gly uit die metaalgleuf waardeur die kleingeld gewoonlik kom. Hermien tel dit op en gee hulle vir Harry oor Ginny se kop aan. Op die boonste een staan *Harry Potter, Reddingspoging*.

"Besoekers aan die Ministerie, julle sal deursoek word en moet jul towerstawwe vir registrasie oorhandig by die veiligheidstonbank aan die oorkant van die Atrium."

"Goed!" sê Harry hard net toe sy litteken skielik pynlik saamtrek. "Kan ons nou gaan?"

Die telefoonhokkie se vloer sidder en die sypaadjie skiet verby die glasvensters. Die testralle verdwyn uit sig en dit word donker bo hul koppe, terwyl hulle met 'n dowwe geratel in die dieptes van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns afsak.

'n Skrefie sagte goue lig val oor hul voete en word breër soos dit teen hul lywe opstyg. Harry knak sy knieë, sy towerstaf so gereed as wat hy kan in die beknopte ruimte, en loer deur die glaspaneel om te sien of iemand hulle in die Atrium inwag. Maar dis heeltemal leeg. Die lig is dowwer as toe hy in die dag daar was en daar brand geen vure onder die kaggelrakke in die mure nie. Die hyser beweeg glad tot dit stop en hy sien die goue simbole wat teen die donkerblou plafon van die Atrium kronkel.

"Die Ministerie vir Towerkuns wens julle 'n aangename aand toe," sê die vrouestem.

Die telefoonhokkie se deur bars oop. Harry tuimel uit, gevolg deur Neville en Mania. Al geluid in die Atrium is die vallende water uit die goue fontein, waar water uit die punte van die heks en toewenaar se towerstawwe, die punt van die sentour se pyl, die punt van die gnoom se hoed en die punte van die huiself se ore voortdurend in die goue fontein inspuit.

"Kom," sê Harry sag en hulle nael deur die portaal, Harry voor, verby die fontein na die toonbank waar die wagtowenaar Harry se towerstaf geweeg het. Maar dis nou verlate.

Harry kan nie glo dat daar geen sekuriteitswagte is nie. Hul afwesigheid kan nie 'n goeie teken wees nie. Die benoude gevoel word erger toe hulle deur die goue hekke na die hysers draf. Hy druk die naaste "af"-knoppie en 'n klaterende hyser verskyn amper onmiddellik. Die goue traliehekke skuif raserig oop en hulle storm in. Harry druk die nommer 9-knoppie, die traliehek slaan dawerend toe en die hyser begin ratelend sak. Harry het nie agtergekom hoe raserig die hysers is toe hy die dag saam met meneer Weasley hier

was nie. Hy is seker die kabaal moet elke wag in die gebou se aandag trek, maar toe die hyser tot stilstand kom, sê die koel vrouestem net: "Departement vir Geheime" en die traliehekke skuif oop. Hulle stap uit in die gang. Niks roer nie, behalwe die fakkel naaste aan hulle wat wild in die bewegende lug van die hyser flakker.

Harry kyk in die gang af na die eenvoudige swart deur. Ná maande en maande se drome is hy uiteindelik hier.

"Kom," fluister hy en begin in die gang af stap. Mania, wat oopmond om haar rondkyk, is reg agter hom.

Hy gaan staan 'n paar tree van die swart deur af. "Goed, julle, dalk dalk moet 'n paar mense hier bly as 'n soort wag, en -"

"En hoe gaan ons miskien vir jou laat weet as hier iemand aankom?" vra Ginny met geligte wenkbroue. "Jy kan myle ver wees!"

"Ons kom saam, Harry," sê Neville.

"Nou maar kom," sê Ron.

Harry is glad nie lus om almal saam te neem nie, maar dit lyk of hy nie 'n keuse het nie. Hy draai om en stap na die deur. Soos in sy droom swaai dit oop en hy tree oor die drumpel met sy maats agterna.

Hulle staan in 'n groot ronde vertrek. Alles is pikswart, ook die vloer en plafon. Eenderse swart deure sonder knoppe verskyn ewe ver van mekaar teen die swart mure en word afgewissel met blakers waarin kerse blou brand. Die flikkerende kerslig weerkaats in die blink marmervloer wat soos donker water lyk.

"Maak die deur toe," mompel Harry.

Hy is onmiddellik spyt die oomblik toe Neville dit doen. Sonder die ligbaan wat uit die fakkelverligte gang agter hulle oor die vloer val, is die plek nou so donker dat hulle 'n rukkie lank net die flikkerende blou kerse teen die mure en hul spookagtige weerkaatsings op die blink vloer sien.

In sy droom het Harry elke keer doelgerig oor die vloer na die oorkantste deur gestap. Maar hier is amper 'n dosyn deure. Hy probeer nog uitwerk watter een hy moet neem, toe 'n harde rammeling skielik opklink. Al die kerse beweeg sywaarts soos die ronde muur begin draai.

Hermien gryp Harry se arm asof sy bang is dat die vloer ook gaan beweeg, maar dit gebeur nie. Vir 'n paar sekondes lyk die blou vlamme om hulle soos neonstrepe teen die draaiende muur. Toe, net so skielik as wat dit begin het, hou die gerammel op en staan alles weer botstil.

Blou strepe gloei voor Harry se oë en hy kan niks anders sien nie.

"Hoekom dink julle het dit gebeur?" fluister Ron benoud.

“Seker sodat ons nie moet weet by watter deur ons ingekom het nie,” sê Ginny in ’n gedempte stem.

Harry besef dadelik sy is reg. Hy weet nou net so min waar hulle ingekom het as wat hy ’n mier op die inkswart vloer kan raak sien. Hy kan ook nie sê by watter een van die dosyn deure hulle moet ingaan nie.

“Hoe kom ons weer hier uit?” vra Neville ongemaklik.

“Dis nie nou belangrik nie.” Harry knipper sy oë in die hoop dat die blou strepe sal verdwyn en verstewig sy greep op sy towerstaf. “Ons hoef nie uit te kom voor ons vir Sirius gevind het –”

“Moet hom net nie roep nie,” keer Hermien dadelik, maar Harry was nie van plan om dit te doen nie. Sy instink waarsku hom om so stil moontlik te wees.

“Waarheen gaan ons nou, Harry?” vra Ron.

“Ek weet nie –” begin Harry. Hy sluk. “In my droom gaan ek deur die swart deur na ’n donker vertrek – dis hierdie een – en dan na ’n kamer wat soort van . . . skitter. Ons sal ’n paar deure moet probeer,” sê hy vinnig. “Ek sal die regte pad herken as ek dit sien. Kom.”

Hy stap na die oorkantste deur en die res volg hom. Hy plaas sy linkerhand teen die koel, blink oppervlak, sy towerstaf gereed voor hom – en druk daarteen.

Die deur swaai maklik oop.

In teenstelling met die eerste ronde, donker vertrek, is hierdie vertrek langwerpiger en helder verlig met lampe wat laag aan goue kettings van die plafon af hang. Maar anders as in Harry se droom is hier geen skitterende liggies nie. Die vertrek lyk leeg, afgesien van ’n paar tafels en ’n enorme glastenk wat in die middel staan. Dis gevul met ’n groen vloeistof waarin ’n aantal pêrelwit voorwerpe dryf en is groot genoeg dat almal van hulle daarin sal kan swem.

“Wat is daai goed?” fluister Ron.

“Weet nie,” sê Harry.

“Is dit visse?” vra Ginny.

“Aquavirius Maaiers!” sê Mania opgewonde. “My pa het gesê die Ministerie teel –”

“Nee,” sê Hermien en haar stem klink vreemd. Sy stap nader en loer deur die kant van die tenk. “Dis breine.”

“Breine?”

“Ja . . . Ek wonder wat hulle daarmee maak.”

Harry gaan staan langs haar. Van naby kan daar geen twyfel wees nie. Die breine dryf soos glinsterende slymerige blomkole in die dieptes van die groen vloeistof in die tenk.

“Kom,” sê Harry. “Dis nie die regte plek nie. Kom ons probeer ’n ander deur.”

"Hier is nog deure," sê Ron en wys na die mure om hulle.

Harry se moed sak en hy wonder skielik hoe groot die plek is. "In my droom het ek deur die ronde kamer na die tweede vertrek gestap. Ek dink ons moet teruggaan en weer probeer."

Hulle stap vinnig terug na die donker, ronde vertrek. Nou swem spookagtige breine pleks van blou strepe voor Harry se oë.

"Wag!" sê Hermien skerp net voor Mania die breinkamer se deur agter haar toemaak. "Ontvlam!"

Sy trek 'n kruis met haar towerstaf in die lug en 'n brandende X verskyn op die deur. Die deur het skaars toegeklik of die gerammel klink weer op en die muur begin weer baie vinnig draai, maar nou is daar 'n groot rooigoue vlek tussen die dowwe bloues. Toe die vertrek weer stil staan, brand die vurige kruis nog steeds teen die deur wat hulle reeds probeer het.

"Slim," sê Harry. "Goed, kom ons probeer hierdie een."

Hy stap na die deur oorkant hom, stoot dit oop en gaan in, sy towerstaf gereed voor hom en sy maats reg agter hom.

Die kamer is groter as die vorige een, dofverlig en reghoekig. In die middel is 'n groot versonke kliparena, 'n goeie ses meter laer as waar hulle op die boonste trap staan. Lang klipbanke loop in steil trappe om die vertrek soos 'n amfiteater, of die hofsaal waar Harry deur die Townenaarshoërhof verhoor is. Maar pleks van die stoel en kettings is daar 'n klipplatform in die middel van die arena. 'n Poort van klip staan daarop. Dis so oud en bouwellig en vol krake dat Harry skaars kan glo dat dit nog staan. 'n Toingrige swart gordyn of sluier hang in die boog. Hoewel die koue lug doodstil is, fladder dit effens asof iemand pas daaraan geraak het.

"Wie's daar?" vra Harry en spring met die trappe af. Niemand antwoord nie, maar die sluier fladder nog steeds.

"Wees tog net versigtig!" fluister Hermien.

Harry klouter oor die rye klipbanke tot by die versonke arena. Sy voetstappe weergalm op die klipvloer toe hy na die platform stap. Die gepunte poort lyk van naby af baie hoër as van daar bo. En die sluier fladder nog steeds asof iemand pas daardeur geglip het.

"Sirius?" sê Harry weer, hierdie keer sagter omdat hy nader is.

Op 'n vreemde manier voel dit asof daar iemand agter die sluier staan. Hy verstewig sy greep op sy towerstaf en stap behoedsaam om die platform, maar daar is niemand agter die poort nie. Al wat hy sien, is die verslete sluier se verkeerde kant.

"Kom ons loop," sê Hermien halfpad na onder. "Dis nie reg nie, Harry. Kom nou, ons moet gaan!"

Sy klink bang, baie banger as wat sy in die breinkamer was, maar

Harry vind die klippoort onweerstaanbaar. Vervalle soos dit is, hou dit 'n vreemde bekoring in. Die fladderende sluier trek hom soos 'n magneet. Hy voel skielik baie lus en klim op die platform en stap daardeur.

"Harry, kom nou, oukei?" sê Hermien kwaai.

"Goed," sê hy, maar hy roer nie. Hy het iets gehoor: dowwe fluisterstemme en prewelende geluide van agter die sluier.

"Wat sê julle?" vra hy hard sodat sy woorde oor die klipbanke weergalm.

"Niemand het iets gesê nie, Harry!" Hermien klim vinnig af na hom toe.

"Ek het iemand daar agter hoor fluister." Hy tree nader terwyl hy fronsend na die sluier staar. "Is dit jy, Ron?"

"Hier's ek, my ou." Ron verskyn aan die kant van die poort.

"Kan niemand anders dit dan hoor nie?" vra Harry toe die gefluister en gemompel harder word. Hy sit sy voet op die platform sonder dat hy van plan was om dit te doen.

"Ek kan dit hoor," sê Mania, wat ook by hulle aangesluit het en na die swaaiende sluier staar. "Daar's mense daar binne."

"Wat bedoel jy met *'daar binne'*?" Hermien spring van die onderste trap af. Sy klink woedend. "Daar is geen *'daar binne'* nie, dis net 'n poort, daar's nie plek vir enigiemand nie. Harry, los dit, gee pad –"

Sy gryp sy arm en trek, maar hy sit hom teë.

"Harry, ons is hier om vir Sirius te soek!" sê sy hard

"Sirius," herhaal Harry, wat nog steeds betower na die fladderende sluier staar, "ja . . ."

Dis of sy brein skielik weer begin werk. Sirius, gevang, vasgebind, gemartel, en hy staar na die poort . . .

Hy tree terug van die platform af en kyk weg van die sluier. "Kom ons gaan . . ."

"Dis wat ek nog die hele tyd – nou toe, kom!" Hermien stap om die platform na Ginny en Neville, wat ook betower na die sluier staar. Sonder om te praat, neem sy Ginny se arm, Ron gryp Neville s'n en hulle klouter almal terug oor die rye klipbanke na die deur aan die bokant.

"Wat dink jy is daardie poort?" vra Harry vir Hermien toe hulle weer in die donker, ronde vertrek staan.

"Ek weet nie, maar wat dit ook al is, dis gevaarlik," sê sy beslis en trek 'n vurige kruis op die deur.

Die muur draai weer en gaan staan. Harry stap oor die vloer na 'n ander deur en probeer dit oopstoot. Dit roer nie.

"Wat's fout?" vra Hermien.

"Dis . . . gesluit . . ." Harry gooi sy gewig daarteen, maar dit roer nog steeds nie.

"Dit moet die regte een wees," sê Ron opgewonde. Hy draf nader om vir Harry te help om die deur oop te dwing. "Dit moet net!"

"Gee pad!" sê Hermien skerp. Sy rig haar towerstaf op die plek waar die slot gewoonlik is en sê: "Alohomora!"

Niks gebeur nie.

"Sirius se mes!" Harry haal dit uit sy kleeu en steek dit in die skreuf tussen die deur en die muur. Die ander hou hom nuuskierig dop terwyl hy dit van bo af ondertoe trek, uithaal en weer sy skouer teen die deur gooi. Dit weier nog steeds om oop te gaan. Erger, toe Harry na sy mes kyk, het die lem gesmelt.

"Goed, ons los hierdie een," besluit Hermien.

"Maar wat as dit die regte een is?" vra Ron en staar vreesbevange en tog verlangend daarna.

"Dis onmoontlik. In sy droom kon Harry by al die deure inkom," sê Hermien. Sy merk die deur met 'n vurige kruis terwyl Harry sy mes, nou net 'n nuttelose hef, in sy sak steek.

"Kan julle dink wat is daarin?" sê Mania gretig toe die muur weer begin draai.

"Seker iets wat blibber," sê Hermien gedemp en Neville giggel senuagtig.

Die muur kom tot stilstand en Harry, wat al hoe wanhopiger voel, druk teen die volgende deur.

"Dis dit!"

Die oomblik toe hy die dansende diamantvormige liggies sien, weet hy dis die regte plek. Toe sy oë aan die briljante glans gewoond is, sien hy oral horlosies staan: klein en groot, staanklokke en opwenklokke. 'n Meedoënlose getik vul die vertrek soos duisende haastige voetstappe. Die bron van die flikkerende diamantblink ligte is 'n enorme kristalklokglas aan die oorkant van die vertrek.

"Hierdie kant toe!"

Harry se hart klop woes noudat hy weet hulle is op die regte spoor. Nes in sy droom stap hy met die nou gangetjie tussen die rye tafels langs na die bron van die lig: die kristalklokglas op 'n tafel in die verste hoek van die vertrek. Dis maklik so hoog soos hy en lyk of dit vol warrelende, glinsterende wind is.

"Oe, kyk!" sê Ginny. Sy staar na die klokglas se hart.

'n Klein juweelblink eiertjie sweef in die glansende windstroom na bo. Dit kraak oop en 'n kolibrie verskyn, wat nog verder boontoe gesleur word. Dan val dit terug, die vere raak klam en deurmekaar en toe dit onder kom, is dit weer in die eierdop toegesluit.

“Moenie tyd mors nie!” sê Harry skerp, want dit lyk of Ginny wil aanhou kyk hoe die eier in ’n voël verander.

“Jy’t lank genoeg by daardie ou poort gedraai!” sê sy vies, maar sy volg hom tog na die deur agter die klokglas.

“Dis die regte plek,” sê Harry weer. Sy hart klop nou so vinnig en hard dat hy verbaas is hy kan nog praat. “Hierlangs –”

Hy kyk om. Almal se towerstawwe is gereed vir aksie en hulle lyk benoud maar ernstig. Hy kyk terug na die deur en druk daarteen. Dit swaai oop.

Hulle is daar. Hy het die plek gekry. Dis so hoog soos ’n kerk en staan vol tamaai hoë rakke gepak met stowwerige glasballe wat dofweg blink in die lig van die kerse wat in blakers teen die rakke brand. Net soos in die ronde kamer het hierdie kerse ook blou vlamme. Die vertrek is baie koud.

Harry sluip vorentoe en loer in een van die donker gangetjies tussen twee rye rakke in. Hy kan geen beweging sien of iets hoor nie.

“Jy’t gesê hy is in ry sewe-en-negentig,” fluister Hermien.

“Jip,” sê Harry asemrig en kyk na die end van die ry naaste aan hom. In die blou kerslig onder die blaker glinster ’n silwer nommer drie-en-vyftig.

“Ek dink ons moet na regs gaan,” fluister Hermien. Sy tuur na die volgende ry. “Ja . . . daardie een is vier-en-vyftig . . .”

“Hou julle towerstawwe gereed,” sê Harry sag.

Hulle sluip versigtig verby die lang rye rakke waarvan die verste punte nagdonker is. Klein vergeelde etikette is onder elke glasbal geplak. Sommige balle het ’n eienaardige vloeibare gloed; ander is donker en dof soos dooie gloeilampe.

Hulle stap verby ry vier-en-tagtig . . . vyf-en-tagtig . . . Harry se ore is gespits vir die geringste geluid van beweging, maar Sirius kan gemuilband wees, of bewusteloos . . . Of, sê ’n stem in sy kop, *dalk* is hy reeds dood . . .

Ek sou dit geweet het, sê hy vir homself terwyl sy hart teen sy adamsappel slaan. Ek sal weet . . .

“Sewe-en-negentig!” fluister Hermien.

Hulle drom saam aan die end van die ry en staar in die gang af. Daar is niemand nie.

“Hy was heel aan die onderkant,” sê Harry en sy mond is droog. “’n Mens kan hom nie van hier af sien nie.”

Hy stap voor, tussen die hoë rakke deur vol glasballe waarvan sommige helder gloei.

“Hy moet hier naby iewers wees,” fluister Harry. Hy is doodseker

dat elke tree hulle nader aan Sirius se verrinneweerde liggaam op die donker vloer bring. "Hier iewers . . . baie naby . . ."

"Harry?" sê Hermien huiwerig, maar hy antwoord nie. Sy mond is te droog.

"Hier iewers . . . hier . . ." sê hy weer.

Hulle is aan die onderpunt van die ry. Hier brand ook dowwe kerse. Maar daar is niks. Net 'n stowwerige, galmende stilte.

"Dalk is hy hier . . ." Harry gaan kyk in die volgende ry. "Of dalk . . ." Hy draf na die een net daarna.

"Harry?" sê Hermien weer.

"Wat?" snou hy.

"Ek . . . ek dink nie Sirius is hier nie."

Niemand sê iets nie. Harry kan nie na sy maats kyk nie. Hy voel siek. Hy kan nie verstaan hoekom Sirius nie hier is nie. Hy moet hier wees. Dis waar hy, Harry, hom gesien het . . .

Hy hardloop verby die rye rakke en kyk langs almal af. Al die gangetjies is leeg. Hy nael verby sy starende maats na die ander kant. Daar is nie 'n teken van Sirius of selfs van 'n worsteling nie.

"Harry?" roep Ron uit.

"Wat?"

Hy wil nie na Ron luister nie, hy wil nie hoor hoe Ron vir hom sê hoe simpel hy was en dat hulle moet teruggaan Hogwarts toe nie. Sy gesig brand. Hy voel hy wil net hier in die donker bly sit sodat hy nie almal se beskuldigende gesigte in die helderverligte Atrium hoef te sien nie.

"Het jy dit gesien?" vra Ron.

"Wat?" sê Harry skielik gretig – dalk is daar 'n teken dat Sirius hier was, 'n leidraad. Hy stap terug na waar almal in ry sewe-en-negentig staan. Daar is niks. Net Ron wat na een van die stowwerige glasballê op die rak staar.

"Wat?" herhaal Harry nors.

"Jou – dis jou naam."

Harry kom 'n entjie nader. Ron wys na 'n glasballetjie wat dofweg gloei asof dit sy eie ligbron het. Dis so vol stof, dit lyk of iemand jare laas daaraan geraak het.

"My naam?" sê Harry verward.

Hy tree nader. Hy's korter as Ron en moet sy nek rek om die vergeelde etiket op die rak onder die vuil glasballetjie te kan lees. Daar is 'n datum in 'n spinnekopskrif, amper sesien jaar gelede, en daaronder staan:

Harry staar daarna.

“Wat is dit?” vra Ron ontsteld. “Wat maak jou naam hier?” Hy kyk na die ander etikette op die rak. “Ek is nie hier nie,” sê hy gekrenk. “Niemand anders is hier nie.”

“Harry, ek dink nie jy moet daaraan raak nie,” sê Hermien skerp toe hy sy hand uitsteek.

“Hoekom nie?” sê hy. “Dit het mos iets met my te doen.”

“Moenie, Harry,” sê Neville meteens. Harry kyk na hom. Sy gesig blink effens van die sweet en dit lyk of hy nie nog spanning kan verduur nie.

“Maar my naam is daarop,” sê Harry.

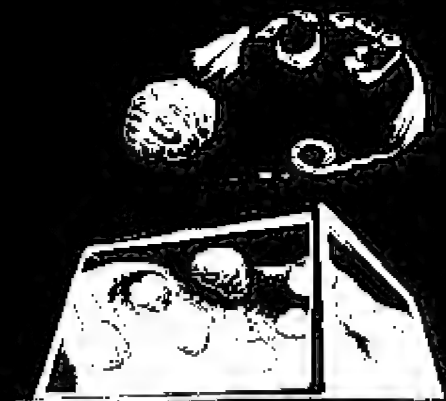
Hy voel skielik roekeloos. Sy vingers sluit om die stowwerige sfeer. Hy het gedink dit sal koud wees, maar dit voel of dit vir ure in die son gelê en bak het sodat die kern nou hitte afgee. Hy haal die glasballetjie van die rak af en bekyk dit. Dis of hy hoop dat iets dramaties gaan gebeur, iets opwindends wat hul lang en gevaarlike reis hierheen sal regverdig.

Hoegenaamd niks gebeur nie. Harry vee die stof van die glasballetjie af terwyl die ander nader kom om ook daarna te kyk.

En toe, reg agter hulle, praat 'n dralende stem.

“Baie mooi, Potter. Draai nou stadig om en gee dit vir my.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



BEYOND THE VEIL

Black shapes were emerging out of thin air all around them, blocking their way left and right; eyes glinted through slits in hoods, a dozen lit wand-tips were pointing directly at their hearts. Ginny gave a gasp of horror.

“To me, Potter,” repeated the drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy as he held out his hand, palm up.

Harry’s insides plummeted sickeningly. They were trapped and outnumbered two to one.

“To me,” said Malfoy yet again.

“Where’s Sirius?” Harry said.

Several of the Death Eaters laughed. A harsh female voice from the midst of the shadowy figures to Harry’s left said triumphantly,

"The Dark Lord always knows!"

"Always," echoed Malfoy softly. "Now, give me the prophecy, Potter."

"I want to know where Sirius is!"

"I want to know where Sirius is!" mimicked the woman to his left.

She and her fellow Death Eaters had closed in so that they were mere feet away from Harry and the others, the light from their wands dazzling Harry's eyes.

"You've got him," said Harry, ignoring the rising panic in his chest, the dread he had been fighting since they had first entered the ninety-seventh row. "He's here. I know he is."

"The little baby woke up fwightened and fort what it dweamed was twoo," said the woman in a horrible, mock-baby voice. Harry felt Ron stir beside him.

"Don't do anything," he muttered. "Not yet —"

The woman who had mimicked him let out a raucous scream of laughter.

"You hear him? *You hear him?* Giving instructions to the other children as though he thinks of fighting us!"

"Oh, you don't know Potter as I do, Bellatrix," said Malfoy softly. "He has a great weakness for heroics; the Dark Lord understands this about him. *Now give me the prophecy, Potter.*"

"I know Sirius is here," said Harry, though panic was causing his chest to constrict and he felt as though he could not breathe properly. *"I know you've got him!"*

More of the Death Eaters laughed, though the woman still laughed loudest of all.

“It’s time you learned the difference between life and dreams, Potter,” said Malfoy. “Now give me the prophecy, or we start using wands.”

“Go on, then,” said Harry, raising his own wand to chest height. As he did so, the five wands of Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Luna rose on either side of him. The knot in Harry’s stomach tightened. If Sirius really was not here, he had led his friends to their deaths for no reason at all. . . .

But the Death Eaters did not strike.

“Hand over the prophecy and no one need get hurt,” said Malfoy coolly.

It was Harry’s turn to laugh.

“Yeah, right!” he said. “I give you this — prophecy, is it? And you’ll just let us skip off home, will you?”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the female Death Eater shrieked, “*Accio Proph —*”

Harry was just ready for her. He shouted “*Protego!*” before she had finished her spell, and though the glass sphere slipped to the tips of his fingers he managed to cling on to it.

“Oh, he knows how to play, little bitty baby Potter,” she said, her mad eyes staring through the slits in her hood. “Very well, then —”

“I TOLD YOU, NO!” Lucius Malfoy roared at the woman. “If you smash it — !”

Harry’s mind was racing. The Death Eaters wanted this dusty spun-glass sphere. He had no interest in it. He just wanted to get them all out of this alive, make sure that none of his friends paid a terrible price for his stupidity.

The woman stepped forward, away from her fellows, and pulled off her hood. Azkaban had hollowed Bellatrix Lestrange's face, making it gaunt and skull-like, but it was alive with a feverish, fanatical glow.

"You need more persuasion?" she said, her chest rising and falling rapidly. "Very well — take the smallest one," she ordered the Death Eaters beside her. "Let him watch while we torture the little girl. I'll do it."

Harry felt the others close in around Ginny. He stepped sideways so that he was right in front of her, the prophecy held up to his chest.

"You'll have to smash this if you want to attack any of us," he told Bellatrix. "I don't think your boss will be too pleased if you come back without it, will he?"

She did not move; she merely stared at him, the tip of her tongue moistening her thin mouth.

"So," said Harry, "what kind of prophecy are we talking about anyway?"

He could not think what to do but to keep talking. Neville's arm was pressed against his, and he could feel him shaking. He could feel one of the other's quickened breath on the back of his head. He was hoping they were all thinking hard about ways to get out of this, because his mind was blank.

"What kind of prophecy?" repeated Bellatrix, the grin fading from her face. "You jest, Harry Potter."

"Nope, not jesting," said Harry, his eyes flicking from Death Eater to Death Eater, looking for a weak link, a space through which they could escape. "How come Voldemort wants it?"

Several of the Death Eaters let out low hisses.

“You dare speak his name?” whispered Bellatrix.

“Yeah,” said Harry, maintaining his tight grip on the glass ball, expecting another attempt to bewitch it from him. “Yeah, I’ve got no problem saying Vol —”

“Shut your mouth!” Bellatrix shrieked. “You dare speak his name with your unworthy lips, you dare besmirch it with your half-blood’s tongue, you dare —”

“Did you know he’s a half-blood too?” said Harry recklessly. Hermione gave a little moan in his ear. “Voldemort? Yeah, his mother was a witch but his dad was a Muggle — or has he been telling you lot he’s pureblood?”

“*STUPEF* — ”

“*NO!*”

A jet of red light had shot from the end of Bellatrix Lestrangle’s wand, but Malfoy had deflected it. His spell caused hers to hit the shelf a foot to the left of Harry and several of the glass orbs there shattered.

Two figures, pearly white as ghosts, fluid as smoke, unfurled themselves from the fragments of broken glass upon the floor and each began to speak. Their voices vied with each other, so that only fragments of what they were saying could be heard over Malfoy and Bellatrix’s shouts.

“... *at the Solstice will come a new* ...” said the figure of an old, bearded man.

“DO NOT ATTACK! WE NEED THE PROPHECY!”

“He dared — he dares —” shrieked Bellatrix incoherently. “— He

stands there — filthy half-blood —”

“WAIT UNTIL WE’VE GOT THE PROPHECY!” bawled Malfoy.

“... *and none will come after* ...” said the figure of a young woman.

The two figures that had burst from the shattered spheres had melted into thin air. Nothing remained of them or their erstwhile homes but fragments of glass upon the floor. They had, however, given Harry an idea. The problem was going to be conveying it to the others.

“You haven’t told me what’s so special about this prophecy I’m supposed to be handing over,” he said, playing for time. He moved his foot slowly sideways, feeling around for someone else’s.

“Do not play games with us, Potter,” said Malfoy.

“I’m not playing games,” said Harry, half his mind on the conversation, half on his wandering foot. And then he found someone’s toes and pressed down upon them. A sharp intake of breath behind him told him they were Hermione’s.

“What?” she whispered.

“Dumbledore never told you that the reason you bear that scar was hidden in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries?” said Malfoy sneeringly.

“I — what?” said Harry, and for a moment he quite forgot his plan. “What about my scar?”

“*What?*” whispered Hermione more urgently behind him.

“Can this be?” said Malfoy, sounding maliciously delighted; some of the Death Eaters were laughing again, and under cover of their laughter, Harry hissed to Hermione, moving his lips as little as

possible, "Smash shelves —"

"Dumbledore never told you?" Malfoy repeated. "Well, this explains why you didn't come earlier, Potter, the Dark Lord wondered why —"

"— when I say go —"

"— you didn't come running when he showed you the place where it was hidden in your dreams. He thought natural curiosity would make you want to hear the exact wording . . ."

"Did he?" said Harry. Behind him he felt rather than heard Hermione passing his message to the others and he sought to keep talking, to distract the Death Eaters. "So he wanted me to come and get it, did he? Why?"

"*Why?*" Malfoy sounded incredulously delighted. "Because the only people who are permitted to retrieve a prophecy from the Department of Mysteries, Potter, are those about whom it was made, as the Dark Lord discovered when he attempted to use others to steal it for him."

"And why did he want to steal a prophecy about me?"

"About both of you, Potter, about both of you . . . Haven't you ever wondered why the Dark Lord tried to kill you as a baby?"

Harry stared into the slitted eyeholes through which Malfoy's gray eyes were gleaming. Was this prophecy the reason Harry's parents had died, the reason he carried his lightning-bolt scar? Was the answer to all of this clutched in his hand?

"Someone made a prophecy about Voldemort and me?" he said quietly, gazing at Lucius Malfoy, his fingers tightening over the warm glass sphere in his hand. It was hardly larger than a Snitch and still

gritty with dust. “And he’s made me come and get it for him? Why couldn’t he come and get it himself?”

“Get it himself?” shrieked Bellatrix on a cackle of mad laughter. “The Dark Lord, walk into the Ministry of Magic, when they are so sweetly ignoring his return? The Dark Lord, reveal himself to the Aurors, when at the moment they are wasting their time on my dear cousin?”

“So he’s got you doing his dirty work for him, has he?” said Harry. “Like he tried to get Sturgis to steal it — and Bode?”

“Very good, Potter, very good . . .” said Malfoy slowly. “But the Dark Lord knows you are not unintell —”

“NOW!” yelled Harry.

Five different voices behind him bellowed “*REDUCTO!*” Five curses flew in five different directions and the shelves opposite them exploded as they hit. The towering structure swayed as a hundred glass spheres burst apart, pearly-white figures unfurled into the air and floated there, their voices echoing from who knew what long-dead past amid the torrent of crashing glass and splintered wood now raining down upon the floor —

“RUN!” Harry yelled, and as the shelves swayed precariously and more glass spheres began to pour from above, he seized a handful of Hermione’s robes and dragged her forward, one arm over his head as chunks of shelf and shards of glass thundered down upon them. A Death Eater lunged forward through the cloud of dust and Harry elbowed him hard in the masked face. They were all yelling, there were cries of pain, thunderous crashes as the shelves collapsed upon themselves, weirdly echoing fragments of the Seers unleashed from

their spheres —

Harry found the way ahead clear and saw Ron, Ginny, and Luna sprint past him, their arms over their heads. Something heavy struck him on the side of the face but he merely ducked his head and sprinted onward; a hand caught him by the shoulder; he heard Hermione shout “*Stupefy!*” and the hand released him at once.

They were at the end of row ninety-seven; Harry turned right and began to sprint in earnest. He could hear footsteps right behind him and Hermione’s voice urging Neville on. The door through which they had come was ajar straight ahead. Harry could see the glittering light of the bell jar, he pelted through it, the prophecy still clutched tight and safe in his hand, waited for the others to hurtle over the threshold before slamming the door behind them —

“*Colloportus!*” gasped Hermione and the door sealed itself with an odd squelching noise.

“Where — where are the others?” gasped Harry.

He had thought that Ron, Luna, and Ginny had been ahead of them, that they would be waiting in this room, but there was nobody there.

“They must have gone the wrong way!” whispered Hermione, terror in her face.

“Listen!” whispered Neville.

Footsteps and shouts echoed from behind the door they had just sealed. Harry put his ear close to the door to listen and heard Lucius Malfoy roar: “Leave Nott, *leave him, I say*, the Dark Lord will not care for Nott’s injuries as much as losing that prophecy — Jugson, come back here, we need to organize! We’ll split into pairs and search, and don’t forget, be gentle with Potter until we’ve got the

prophecy, you can kill the others if necessary — Bellatrix, Rodolphus, you take the left, Crabbe, Rabastan, go right — Jugson, Dolohov, the door straight ahead — Macnair and Avery, through here — Rookwood, over there — Mulciber, come with me!”

“What do we do?” Hermione asked Harry, trembling from head to foot.

“Well, we don’t stand here waiting for them to find us, for a start,” said Harry. “Let’s get away from this door . . .”

They ran, quietly as they could, past the shimmering bell jar where the tiny egg was hatching and unhatching, toward the exit into the circular hallway at the far end of the room. They were almost there when Harry heard something large and heavy collide with the door Hermione had charmed shut.

“Stand aside!” said a rough voice. “*Alohomora!*!”

As the door flew open, Harry, Hermione, and Neville dived under desks. They could see the bottom of the two Death Eaters’ robes drawing nearer, their feet moving rapidly.

“They might’ve run straight through to the hall,” said the rough voice.

“Check under the desks,” said another.

Harry saw the knees of the Death Eaters bend. Poking his wand out from under the desk he shouted, “*STUPEFY!*”

A jet of red light hit the nearest Death Eater; he fell backward into a grandfather clock and knocked it over. The second Death Eater, however, had leapt aside to avoid Harry’s spell and now pointed his own wand at Hermione, who had crawled out from under the desk to get a better aim.

“Avada —”

Harry launched himself across the floor and grabbed the Death Eater around the knees, causing him to topple and his aim to go awry. Neville overturned his desk in his anxiety to help; pointing his wand wildly at the struggling pair he cried, *“EXPELLIARMUS!”*

Both Harry’s and the Death Eater’s wands flew out of their hands and soared back toward the entrance to the Hall of Prophecy; both scrambled to their feet and charged after them, the Death Eater in front and Harry hot on his heels, Neville bringing up the rear, plainly horrorstruck at what he had done.

“Get out of the way, Harry!” yelled Neville, clearly determined to repair the damage.

Harry flung himself sideways as Neville took aim again and shouted, *“STUPEFY!”*

The jet of red light flew right over the Death Eater’s shoulder and hit a glass-fronted cabinet on the wall full of variously shaped hourglasses. The cabinet fell to the floor and burst apart, glass flying everywhere, then sprang back up onto the wall, fully mended, then fell down again, and shattered —

The Death Eater had snatched up his wand, which lay on the floor beside the glittering bell jar. Harry ducked down behind another desk as the man turned — his mask had slipped so that he could not see, he ripped it off with his free hand and shouted, *“STUP —”*

“STUPEFY!” screamed Hermione, who had just caught up with them. The jet of red light hit the Death Eater in the middle of his chest; he froze, his arm still raised, his wand fell to the floor with a clatter and he collapsed backward toward the bell jar. Harry

expected to hear a *clunk*, for the man to hit solid glass and slide off the jar onto the floor, but instead, his head sank through the surface of the bell jar as though it was nothing but a soap bubble and he came to rest, sprawled on his back on the table, with his head lying inside the jar full of glittering wind.

“*Accio Wand!*” cried Hermione. Harry’s wand flew from a dark corner into her hand and she threw it to him.

“Thanks,” he said, “right, let’s get out of —”

“Look out!” said Neville, horrified, staring at the Death Eater’s head in the bell jar.

All three of them raised their wands again, but none of them struck. They were all gazing, openmouthed, appalled, at what was happening to the man’s head.

It was shrinking very fast, growing balder and balder, the black hair and stubble retracting into his skull, his cheeks smooth, his skull round and covered with a peachlike fuzz.

A baby’s head now sat grotesquely on top of the thick, muscled neck of the Death Eater as he struggled to get up again. But even as they watched, their mouths open, the head began to swell to its previous proportions again, thick black hair was sprouting from the pate and chin.

“It’s time,” said Hermione in an awestruck voice. “*Time . . .*”

The Death Eater shook his ugly head again, trying to clear it, but before he could pull himself together again, it began to shrink back to babyhood once more.

There was a shout from a room nearby, then a crash and a scream.

“RON?” Harry yelled, turning quickly from the monstrous

transformation taking place before them. "GINNY? LUNA?"

"Harry!" Hermione screamed.

The Death Eater had pulled his head out of the bell jar. His appearance was utterly bizarre, his tiny baby's head bawling loudly while his thick arms flailed dangerously in all directions, narrowly missing Harry, who ducked. Harry raised his wand but to his amazement Hermione seized his arm.

"You can't hurt a baby!"

There was no time to argue the point. Harry could hear more footsteps growing louder from the Hall of Prophecy they had just left and knew, too late, that he ought not to have shouted and given away their position.

"Come on!" he said again, and leaving the ugly baby-headed Death Eater staggering behind them, they took off for the door that stood ajar at the other end of the room, leading back into the black hallway.

They had run halfway toward it when Harry saw through the open door two more Death Eaters running across the black room toward them. Veering left he burst instead into a small, dark, cluttered office and slammed the door behind them.

"*Collo —*" began Hermione, but before she could complete the spell the door had burst open again and the two Death Eaters had come hurtling inside. With a cry of triumph, both yelled, "*IMPEDIMENTA!*"

Harry, Hermione, and Neville were all knocked backward off their feet. Neville was thrown over the desk and disappeared from view, Hermione smashed into a bookcase and was promptly deluged in a cascade of heavy books; the back of Harry's head slammed into the

stone wall behind him, tiny lights burst in front of his eyes, and for a moment he was too dizzy and bewildered to react.

“WE’VE GOT HIM!” yelled the Death Eater nearest Harry, “IN AN OFFICE OFF —”

“*Silencio!*” cried Hermione, and the man’s voice was extinguished. He continued to mouth through the hole in his mask, but no sound came out; he was thrust aside by his fellow.

“*Petrificus Totalus!*” shouted Harry, as the second Death Eater raised his wand. His arms and legs snapped together and he fell forward, facedown onto the rug at Harry’s feet, stiff as a board and unable to move at all.

“Well done, Ha —”

But the Death Eater Hermione had just struck dumb made a sudden slashing movement with his wand from which flew a streak of what looked like purple flame. It passed right across Hermione’s chest; she gave a tiny “oh!” as though of surprise and then crumpled onto the floor where she lay motionless.

“HERMIONE!”

Harry fell to his knees beside her as Neville crawled rapidly toward her from under the desk, his wand held up in front of him. The Death Eater kicked out hard at Neville’s head as he emerged — his foot broke Neville’s wand in two and connected with his face — Neville gave a howl of pain and recoiled, clutching his mouth and nose. Harry twisted around, his own wand held high, and saw that the Death Eater had ripped off his mask and was pointing his wand directly at Harry, who recognized the long, pale, twisted face from the *Daily Prophet*: Antonin Dolohov, the wizard who had murdered

the Prewetts.

Dolohov grinned. With his free hand, he pointed from the prophecy still clutched in Harry's hand, to himself, then at Hermione. Though he could no longer speak his meaning could not have been clearer: *Give me the prophecy, or you get the same as her. . . .*

"Like you won't kill us all the moment I hand it over anyway!" said Harry.

A whine of panic inside his head was preventing him thinking properly. He had one hand on Hermione's shoulder, which was still warm, yet did not dare look at her properly. *Don't let her be dead, don't let her be dead, it's my fault if she's dead. . . .*

"Whaddever you do, Harry," said Neville fiercely from under the desk, lowering his hands to show a clearly broken nose and blood pouring down his mouth and chin, "don'd gib it to him!"

Then there was a crash outside the door, and Dolohov looked over his shoulder — the baby-headed Death Eater had appeared in the doorway, his head bawling, his great fists still flailing uncontrollably at everything around him.

Harry seized his chance: "*PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!*"

The spell hit Dolohov before he could block it, and he toppled forward across his comrade, both of them rigid as boards and unable to move an inch.

"Hermione," Harry said at once, shaking her as the baby-headed Death Eater blundered out of sight again. "Hermione, wake up. . . ."

"Whaddid he do to her?" said Neville, crawling out from under the desk again to kneel at her other side, blood streaming from his rapidly swelling nose.

"I dunno . . ."

Neville groped for Hermione's wrist.

"Dat's a pulse, Harry, I'b sure id is . . ."

Such a powerful wave of relief swept through Harry that for a moment he felt light-headed.

"She's alive?"

"Yeah, I dink so . . ."

There was a pause in which Harry listened hard for the sounds of more footsteps, but all he could hear were the whimpers and blunderings of the baby Death Eater in the next room.

"Neville, we're not far from the exit," Harry whispered. "We're right next to that circular room. . . . If we can just get you across it and find the right door before any more Death Eaters come, I'll bet you can get Hermione up the corridor and into the lift. . . . Then you could find someone. . . . Raise the alarm. . . ."

"And whad are you going do do?" said Neville, mopping his bleeding nose with his sleeve and frowning at Harry.

"I've got to find the others," said Harry.

"Well, I'b going do find dem wid you," said Neville firmly.

"But Hermione —"

"We'll dake her wid us," said Neville firmly. "I'll carry her — you're bedder at fighding dem dan I ab —"

He stood up and seized one of Hermione's arms, glared at Harry, who hesitated, then grabbed the other and helped hoist Hermione's limp form over Neville's shoulders.

"Wait," said Harry, snatching up Hermione's wand from the floor

and shoving it into Neville's hand, "you'd better take this . . ."

Neville kicked aside the broken fragments of his own wand as they walked slowly toward the door.

"My gran's going to kill me," said Neville thickly, blood spattering from his nose as he spoke, "that was by dad's old wand . . ."

Harry stuck his head out of the door and looked around cautiously. The baby-headed Death Eater was screaming and banging into things, toppling grandfather clocks and overturning desks, bawling and confused, while the glass cabinet that Harry now suspected had contained Time-Turners continued to fall, shatter, and repair itself on the wall behind them.

"He's never going to notice us," he whispered. "Come . . . keep close behind me . . ."

They crept out of the office and back toward the door into the black hallway, which now seemed completely deserted. They walked a few steps forward, Neville tottering slightly due to Hermione's weight. The door of the Time Room swung shut behind them, and the walls began to rotate once more. The recent blow on the back of Harry's head seemed to have unsteadied him; he narrowed his eyes, swaying slightly, until the walls stopped moving again. With a sinking heart Harry saw that Hermione's fiery crosses had faded from the doors.

"So which way do you reckon — ?"

But before they could make a decision as to which way to try, a door to their right sprang open and three people fell out of it.

"Ron!" croaked Harry, dashing toward them. "Ginny — are you all?"

— 7 —

“Harry,” said Ron, giggling weakly, lurching forward, seizing the front of Harry’s robes and gazing at him with unfocused eyes. “There you are. . . . Ha ha ha . . . You look funny, Harry. . . . You’re all messed up . . .”

Ron’s face was very white and something dark was trickling from the corner of his mouth. Next moment his knees had given way, but he still clutched the front of Harry’s robes, so that Harry was pulled into a kind of bow.

“Ginny?” Harry said fearfully. “What happened?”

But Ginny shook her head and slid down the wall into a sitting position, panting and holding her ankle.

“I think her ankle’s broken, I heard something crack,” whispered Luna, who was bending over her and who alone seemed to be unhurt. “Four of them chased us into a dark room full of planets, it was a very odd place, some of the time we were just floating in the dark —”

“Harry, we saw Uranus up close!” said Ron, still giggling feebly. “Get it, Harry? We saw Uranus — ha ha ha —”

A bubble of blood grew at the corner of Ron’s mouth and burst.

“Anyway, one of them grabbed Ginny’s foot, I used the Reductor Curse and blew up Pluto in his face, but . . .”

Luna gestured hopelessly at Ginny, who was breathing in a very shallow way, her eyes still closed.

“And what about Ron?” said Harry fearfully, as Ron continued to giggle, still hanging off the front of Harry’s robes.

“I don’t know what they hit him with,” said Luna sadly, “but he’s

gone a bit funny, I could hardly get him along at all . . .”

“Harry,” said Ron, pulling Harry’s ear down to his mouth and still giggling weakly, “you know who this girl is, Harry? She’s Loony . . . Loony Lovegood . . . ha ha ha . . .”

“We’ve got to get out of here,” said Harry firmly. “Luna, can you help Ginny?”

“Yes,” said Luna, sticking her wand behind her ear for safekeeping, putting an arm around Ginny’s waist and pulling her up.

“It’s only my ankle, I can do it myself!” said Ginny impatiently, but next moment she had collapsed sideways and grabbed Luna for support. Harry pulled Ron’s arm over his shoulder just as, so many months ago, he had pulled Dudley’s. He looked around: They had a one-in-twelve chance of getting the exit right the first time —

He heaved Ron toward a door; they were within a few feet of it when another door across the hall burst open and three Death Eaters sped into the hall, led by Bellatrix Lestrange.

“There they are!” she shrieked.

Stunning Spells shot across the room. Harry smashed his way through the door ahead, flung Ron unceremoniously from him, and ducked back to help Neville in with Hermione. They were all over the threshold just in time to slam the door against Bellatrix.

“Colloportus!” shouted Harry, and he heard three bodies slam into the door on the other side.

“It doesn’t matter!” said a man’s voice. “There are other ways in — WE’VE GOT THEM, THEY’RE HERE!”

Harry spun around. They were back in the Brain Room and, sure enough, there were doors all around the walls. He could hear

footsteps in the hall behind them as more Death Eaters came running to join the first.

“Luna — Neville — help me!”

The three of them tore around the room, sealing the doors as they went: Harry crashed into a table and rolled over the top of it in his haste to reach the next door.

“*Colloportus!*”

There were footsteps running along behind the doors; every now and then another heavy body would launch itself against one, so it creaked and shuddered: Luna and Neville were bewitching the doors along the opposite wall — then, as Harry reached the very top of the room, he heard Luna cry, “*Collo — aaaaaaaaargh. . .*”

He turned in time to see her flying through the air. Five Death Eaters were surging into the room through the door she had not reached in time; Luna hit a desk, slid over its surface and onto the floor on the other side where she lay sprawled, as still as Hermione.

“Get Potter!” shrieked Bellatrix, and she ran at him. He dodged her and sprinted back up the room; he was safe as long as they thought they might hit the prophecy —

“Hey!” said Ron, who had staggered to his feet and was now tottering drunkenly toward Harry, giggling. “Hey, Harry, there are *brains* in here, ha ha ha, isn’t that weird, Harry?”

“Ron, get out of the way, get down —”

But Ron had already pointed his wand at the tank.

“Honest, Harry, they’re brains — look — *Accio Brain!*”

The scene seemed momentarily frozen. Harry, Ginny, and Neville and each of the Death Eaters turned in spite of themselves to watch

the top of the tank as a brain burst from the green liquid like a leaping fish. For a moment it seemed suspended in midair, then it soared toward Ron, spinning as it came, and what looked like ribbons of moving images flew from it, unraveling like rolls of film —

“Ha ha ha, Harry, look at it —” said Ron, watching it disgorge its gaudy innards. “Harry, come and touch it, bet it’s weird —”

“RON, NO!”

Harry did not know what would happen if Ron touched the tentacles of thought now flying behind the brain, but he was sure it would not be anything good. He darted forward but Ron had already caught the brain in his outstretched hands.

The moment they made contact with his skin, the tentacles began wrapping themselves around Ron’s arms like ropes.

“Harry, look what’s happen — no — no, I don’t like it — no, stop — *stop* —”

But the thin ribbons were spinning around Ron’s chest now. He tugged and tore at them as the brain was pulled tight against him like an octopus’s body.

“*Diffindo!*” yelled Harry, trying to sever the feelers wrapping themselves tightly around Ron before his eyes, but they would not break. Ron fell over, still thrashing against his bonds.

“Harry, it’ll suffocate him!” screamed Ginny, immobilized by her broken ankle on the floor — then a jet of red light flew from one of the Death Eater’s wands and hit her squarely in the face. She keeled over sideways and lay there unconscious.

“*STUPEFY!*” shouted Neville, wheeling around and waving Hermione’s wand at the oncoming Death Eaters. “*STUPEFY,*

STUBIFY!"

But nothing happened — one of the Death Eaters shot their own Stunning Spell at Neville; it missed him by inches. Harry and Neville were now the only two left fighting the five Death Eaters, two of whom sent streams of silver light like arrows past them that left craters in the wall behind them. Harry ran for it as Bellatrix Lestrange sprinted right at him. Holding the prophecy high above his head he sprinted back up the room; all he could think of doing was to draw the Death Eaters away from the others.

It seemed to have worked. They streaked after him, knocking chairs and tables flying but not daring to bewitch him in case they hurt the prophecy, and he dashed through the only door still open, the one through which the Death Eaters themselves had come. Inwardly praying that Neville would stay with Ron — find some way of releasing him — he ran a few feet into the new room and felt the floor vanish —

He was falling down steep stone step after steep stone step, bouncing on every tier until at last, with a crash that knocked all the breath out of his body, he landed flat on his back in the sunken pit where the stone archway stood on its dais. The whole room was ringing with the Death Eaters' laughter. He looked up and saw the five who had been in the Brain Room descending toward him, while as many more emerged through other doorways and began leaping from bench to bench toward him. Harry got to his feet though his legs were trembling so badly they barely supported him. The prophecy was still miraculously unbroken in his left hand, his wand clutched tightly in his right. He backed away, looking around, trying to keep

all the Death Eaters within his sights. The back of his legs hit something solid; he had reached the dais where the archway stood. He climbed backward onto it.

The Death Eaters all halted, gazing at him. Some were panting as hard as he was. One was bleeding badly; Dolohov, freed of the full Body-Bind, was leering, his wand pointing straight at Harry's face.

"Potter, your race is run," drawled Lucius Malfoy, pulling off his mask. "Now hand me the prophecy like a good boy . . ."

"Let — let the others go, and I'll give it to you!" said Harry desperately.

A few of the Death Eaters laughed.

"You are not in a position to bargain, Potter," said Lucius Malfoy, his pale face flushed with pleasure. "You see, there are ten of us and only one of you . . . or hasn't Dumbledore ever taught you how to count?"

"He's dot alone!" shouted a voice from above them. "He's still god be!"

Harry's heart sank. Neville was scrambling down the stone benches toward them, Hermione's wand held fast in his trembling hand.

"Neville — no — go back to Ron —"

"*STUBEFY!*" Neville shouted again, pointing his wand at each Death Eater in turn, "*STUBEFY! STUBE —*"

One of the largest Death Eaters seized Neville from behind, pinioning his arms to his sides. He struggled and kicked; several of the Death Eaters laughed.

"It's Longbottom, isn't it?" sneered Lucius Malfoy. "Well, your

grandmother is used to losing family members to our cause. . . . Your death will not come as a great shock . . .”

“Longbottom?” repeated Bellatrix, and a truly evil smile lit her gaunt face. “Why, I have had the pleasure of meeting your parents, boy . . .”

“I DOE YOU HAB!” roared Neville, and he fought so hard against his captor’s encircling grip that the Death Eater shouted, “Someone Stun him!”

“No, no, no,” said Bellatrix. She looked transported, alive with excitement as she glanced at Harry, then back at Neville. “No, let’s see how long Longbottom lasts before he cracks like his parents. . . . Unless Potter wants to give us the prophecy —”

“DON’D GIB ID DO DEM!” roared Neville, who seemed beside himself, kicking and writhing as Bellatrix drew nearer to him and his captor, her wand raised. “DON’D GIB ID DO DEM, HARRY!”

Bellatrix raised her wand. “*Crucio!*”

Neville screamed, his legs drawn up to his chest so that the Death Eater holding him was momentarily holding him off the ground. The Death Eater dropped him and he fell to the floor, twitching and screaming in agony.

“That was just a taster!” said Bellatrix, raising her wand so that Neville’s screams stopped and he lay sobbing at her feet. She turned and gazed up at Harry. “Now, Potter, either give us the prophecy, or watch your little friend die the hard way!”

Harry did not have to think; there was no choice. The prophecy was hot with the heat from his clutching hand as he held it out. Malfoy jumped forward to take it.

Then, high above them, two more doors burst open and five more people sprinted into the room: Sirius, Lupin, Moody, Tonks, and Kingsley.

Malfoy turned and raised his wand, but Tonks had already sent a Stunning Spell right at him. Harry did not wait to see whether it had made contact, but dived off the dais out of the way. The Death Eaters were completely distracted by the appearance of the members of the Order, who were now raining spells down upon them as they jumped from step to step toward the sunken floor. Through the darting bodies, the flashes of light, Harry could see Neville crawling along. He dodged another jet of red light and flung himself flat on the ground to reach Neville.

“Are you okay?” he yelled, as another spell soared inches over their heads.

“Yes,” said Neville, trying to pull himself up.

“And Ron?”

“I dink he’s all right — he was still fighting the brain when I left —”

The stone floor between them exploded as a spell hit it, leaving a crater right where Neville’s hand had been seconds before. Both scrambled away from the spot, then a thick arm came out of nowhere, seized Harry around the neck and pulled him upright, so that his toes were barely touching the floor.

“Give it to me,” growled a voice in his ear, “give me the prophecy —”

The man was pressing so tightly on Harry’s windpipe that he could not breathe — through watering eyes he saw Sirius dueling with a

Death Eater some ten feet away. Kingsley was fighting two at once; Tonks, still halfway up the tiered seats, was firing spells down at Bellatrix — nobody seemed to realize that Harry was dying. . . . He turned his wand backward toward the man's side, but had no breath to utter an incantation, and the man's free hand was groping toward the hand in which Harry was grasping the prophecy —

“AARGH!”

Neville had come lunging out of nowhere. Unable to articulate a spell, he had jabbed Hermione's wand hard into the eyehole of the Death Eater's mask. The man relinquished Harry at once with a howl of pain and Harry whirled around to face him and gasped, “*STUPEFY!*”

The Death Eater keeled over backward and his mask slipped off. It was Macnair, Buckbeak's would-be killer, one of his eyes now swollen and bloodshot.

“Thanks!” Harry said to Neville, pulling him aside as Sirius and his Death Eater lurched past, dueling so fiercely that their wands were blurs. Then Harry's foot made contact with something round and hard and he slipped — for a moment he thought he had dropped the prophecy, then saw Moody's magic eye spinning away across the floor.

Its owner was lying on his side, bleeding from the head, and his attacker was now bearing down upon Harry and Neville: Dolohov, his long pale face twisted with glee.

“*Tarantallegra!*” he shouted, his wand pointing at Neville, whose legs went immediately into a kind of frenzied tap dance, unbalancing him and causing him to fall to the floor again. “Now, Potter —”

He made the same slashing movement with his wand that he had used on Hermione just as Harry yelled, "*Protego!*"

Harry felt something streak across his face like a blunt knife but the force of it knocked him sideways, and he fell over Neville's jerking legs, but the Shield Charm had stopped the worst of the spell.

Dolohov raised his wand again. "*Accio Proph —*"

Sirius hurtled out of nowhere, rammed Dolohov with his shoulder, and sent him flying out of the way. The prophecy had again flown to the tips of Harry's fingers but he had managed to cling to it. Now Sirius and Dolohov were dueling, their wands flashing like swords, sparks flying from their wand tips —

Dolohov drew back his wand to make the same slashing movement he had used on Harry and Hermione. Springing up, Harry yelled, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" Once again, Dolohov's arms and legs snapped together and he keeled over backward, landing with a crash on his back.

"Nice one!" shouted Sirius, forcing Harry's head down as a pair of Stunning Spells flew toward them. "Now I want you to get out of —"

They both ducked again. A jet of green light had narrowly missed Sirius; across the room Harry saw Tonks fall from halfway up the stone steps, her limp form toppling from stone seat to stone seat, and Bellatrix, triumphant, running back toward the fray.

"Harry, take the prophecy, grab Neville, and run!" Sirius yelled, dashing to meet Bellatrix. Harry did not see what happened next: Kingsley swayed across his field of vision, battling with the pockmarked Rookwood, now mask-less; another jet of green light flew over Harry's head as he launched himself toward Neville —

“Can you stand?” he bellowed in Neville’s ear, as Neville’s legs jerked and twitched uncontrollably. “Put your arm round my neck —”

Neville did so — Harry heaved — Neville’s legs were still flying in every direction, they would not support him and then, out of nowhere, a man lunged at them. Both fell backward, Neville’s legs waving wildly like an overturned beetle’s, Harry with his left arm held up in the air to try and save the small glass ball from being smashed.

“The prophecy, give me the prophecy, Potter!” snarled Lucius Malfoy’s voice in his ear, and Harry felt the tip of Malfoy’s wand pressing hard between his ribs.

“No — get — off — me . . . Neville — catch it!”

Harry flung the prophecy across the floor, Neville spun himself around on his back and scooped the ball to his chest. Malfoy pointed the wand instead at Neville, but Harry jabbed his own wand back over his shoulder and yelled, “*Impedimenta!*”

Malfoy was blasted off his back. As Harry scrambled up again he looked around and saw Malfoy smash into the dais on which Sirius and Bellatrix were now dueling. Malfoy aimed his wand at Harry and Neville again, but before he could draw breath to strike, Lupin had jumped between them.

“Harry, round up the others and GO!”

Harry seized Neville by the shoulder of his robes and lifted him bodily onto the first tier of stone steps. Neville’s legs twitched and jerked and would not support his weight. Harry heaved again with all the strength he possessed and they climbed another step —

A spell hit the stone bench at Harry’s heel. It crumbled away and

he fell back to the step below. Neville sank onto the bench above, his legs still jerking and thrashing, and thrust the prophecy into his pocket.

“Come on!” said Harry desperately, hauling at Neville’s robes. “Just try and push with your legs —”

He gave another stupendous heave and Neville’s robes tore all along the left seam — the small spun-glass ball dropped from his pocket and before either of them could catch it, one of Neville’s floundering feet kicked it. It flew some ten feet to their right and smashed on the step beneath them. As both of them stared at the place where it had broken, appalled at what had happened, a pearly-white figure with hugely magnified eyes rose into the air, unnoticed by any but them. Harry could see its mouth moving, but in all the crashes and screams and yells surrounding them, not one word of the prophecy could he hear. The figure stopped speaking and dissolved into nothingness.

“Harry, I’b sorry!” cried Neville, his face anguished as his legs continued to flounder, “I’b so sorry, Harry, I didn’ d bean do —”

“It doesn’t matter!” Harry shouted. “Just try and stand, let’s get out of —”

“*Dumbledore!*” said Neville, his sweaty face suddenly transported, staring over Harry’s shoulder.

“What?”

“DUBBLEDORE!”

Harry turned to look where Neville was staring. Directly above them, framed in the doorway from the Brain Room, stood Albus Dumbledore, his wand aloft, his face white and furious. Harry felt a

kind of electric charge surge through every particle of his body — *they were saved.*

Dumbledore had already sped past Neville and Harry, who had no more thoughts of leaving, when the Death Eaters nearest realized Dumbledore was there, and yelled to the others. One of the Death Eaters ran for it, scrabbling like a monkey up the stone steps opposite. Dumbledore's spell pulled him back as easily and effortlessly as though he had hooked him with an invisible line —

Only one couple were still battling, apparently unaware of the new arrival. Harry saw Sirius duck Bellatrix's jet of red light. He was laughing at her. "Come on, you can do better than that!" he yelled, his voice echoing around the cavernous room.

The second jet of light hit him squarely on the chest.

The laughter had not quite died from his face, but his eyes widened in shock.

Harry released Neville, though he was unaware of doing so. Harry jumped to the ground, pulling out his wand, as Dumbledore turned to the dais too.

It seemed to take Sirius an age to fall. His body curved in a graceful arc as he sank backward through the ragged veil hanging from the arch. . . .

And Harry saw the look of mingled fear and surprise on his godfather's wasted, once-handsome face as he fell through the ancient doorway and disappeared behind the veil, which fluttered for a moment as though in a high wind and then fell back into place.

Harry heard Bellatrix Lestrange's triumphant scream, but knew it meant nothing — Sirius had only just fallen through the archway, he

would reappear from the other side any second. . . .

But Sirius did not reappear.

“SIRIUS!” Harry yelled, “SIRIUS!”

Harry’s breath was coming in searing gasps. Sirius must be just behind the curtain, he, Harry, would pull him back out again. . . .

But as he sprinted toward the dais, Lupin grabbed Harry around the chest, holding him back.

“There’s nothing you can do, Harry —”

“Get him, save him, he’s only just gone through!”

“It’s too late, Harry —”

“We can still reach him —”

Harry struggled hard and viciously, but Lupin would not let go. . . .

“There’s nothing you can do, Harry. . . . nothing. . . . He’s gone.”

Agter die sluier

Swart figure verskyn rondom hulle en versper hul pad na alle kante. Oë glinster deur splete in maskers, 'n dosyn brandende towerstawwe wys na hul harte. Ginny snak van afgryse.

“Gee hier, Potter,” herhaal die dralende stem van Lucius Malfoy terwyl hy sy hand uithou.

Harry se ingewande trek pynlik saam. Hulle is vas en die Doodseters vorm 'n oormag van twee teen een.

“Gee hier,” sê Malfoy weer.

“Waar is Sirius?” vra Harry.

Verskeie Doodseters lag. Uit die skaduagtige figure aan Harry se linkerkant sê 'n skor vrouestem triomfantlik: “Die Donker Heer is altyd reg!”

“Altyd,” eggo Malfoy. “Gee die profesie vir my, Potter.”

“Ek wil weet waar Sirius is!”

“Ek wil weet waar Sirius is!” koggel die vrouestem.

Sy en haar mede-Doodseters kom nader tot hulle enkele treë van Harry-hulle is. Die lig van hul towerstawwe verblind Harry se oë.

“Julle het hom gevang.” Harry probeer sy stygende paniek ignoreer, die angste waarteen hy al veg sedert hulle met ry sewe-en-negentig langs gestap het. “Hy's hier. Ek weet hy is.”

“Die kwein ou babatjie het wakker heword en hedink sy dwoom is waar,” koggel die vrou in 'n aaklige babastemmetjie.

Harry voel hoe Ron langs hom roer. “Moet niks doen nie,” prewel hy. “Nog nie —”

Die vrou skree van die lag. “Het julle hom gehoor? Het julle hom gehoor? Gee vir die ander kinders instruksies asof hy dink hulle kan teen ons veg!”

“O, jy ken nie vir Potter soos ek hom ken nie, Bellatrix,” sê Malfoy sag. “Hy is baie heldhaftig — en die Donker Heer weet dit. Gee die profesie vir my, Potter.”

“Ek weet Sirius is hier,” sê Harry hoewel die gevoel van paniek sy

borskas laat saamtrek sodat hy nie behoorlik kan asemhaal nie. "Ek weet julle het hom!"

Nog Doodseters lag, die vrou die hardste van almal.

"Dis tyd dat jy die verskil tussen die lewe en drome leer ken, Potter," sê Malfoy. "Gee die profesie vir my of ons gebruik ons towerstawwe."

"Nou maar doen dit," sê Harry en lig sy eie towerstaf tot borshoogte. Toe hy dit doen, lig Ron, Hermien, Neville, Ginny en Mania aan weerskante van hom ook hul towerstawwe. Die knoop in Harry se maag trek stywer. As Sirius regtig nie hier is nie, het hy sy vriende na 'n sinnelose dood gelei.

Maar die Doodseters slaan nie toe nie.

"Oorhandig die profesie en niemand sal seerkry nie," sê Malfoy koel.

Dis Harry se beurt om te lag.

"Ja, nogal! Ek gee vir jou hierdie . . . profesie, en dan laat jy ons almal huis toe gaan?"

Sy woorde is skaars koud toe Bellatrix skree: "Accio profe-"

Harry was gereed daarvoor. Hy skree "Protego!" voor sy haar toverspreuk kan voltooi en hoewel die glasballetjie tot by sy vingerpunte glip, kry hy dit net-net reg om sy greep daarop te behou.

"Die klein Pottie speel baie oulikies," sê die vrou en haar waansinnige oë gluur deur die splete in haar kap na hom. "Goed dan -"

"EK HET GESÊ NEE!" skree Lucius Malfoy vir haar. "Wat as dit breek -?"

Harry dink vinnig. Die Doodseters wil hierdie stowwerige glasballetjie hê. Hy stel nie in die minste daarin belang nie. Hy wil sy vriende lewend hier uitkry en seker maak dat nie een van hulle 'n vreeslike prys betaal vir sy simpel besluite nie . . .

Die vrou tree weg van haar makkers en haal haar masker af. Azkaban het sy merk op Bellatrix Lestrange se gesig gelaat. Dis uitgeteer en skeletagtig, maar brand met 'n koorsige, fanatieke gloed.

"Jy wil dus oorreed word?" sê sy terwyl haar bors vinnig op en neer dein. "Nou goed - gryp die kleinste een!" beveel sy die Doodseters naaste aan haar. "Laat hy toekyk terwyl ons haar martel. Ek sal dit doen."

Harry voel hoe die ander nader aan Ginny beweeg en hy gee 'n tree na die kant toe sodat hy voor haar staan, die profesie styf teen sy bors vasgedruk.

"Jy sal dit moet vernietig as jy een van ons wil aanval," sê hy bruusk. "Ek dink nie jou baas sal in sy skik wees as jy met leë hande daar aankom nie, hê?"

Bellatrix roer nie. Sy staan bloot na hom terwyl die punt van haar tong oor haar dun lippe speel.

"So," sê Harry, "watse profesie is dit in elk geval?"

Al waaraan hy kan dink, is om aan die praat te bly. Neville se arm raak teen syne en Harry kan hom voel bewe. Hy voel ook die ander se gejaagde asemhaling kort agter hom. Hy hoop hulle dink almal aan maniere om hier uit te kom, want sy verstand staan stil.

"Watse profesie?" herhaal Bellatrix en haar glimlag raak weg. "Jy maak seker 'n grap, Harry Potter."

"Nee, glad nie." Harry se oë flikker van Doodseter na Doodseter op soek na die swak skakel, 'n moontlike ontsnapkans. "Hoekom wil Woldemort dit hê?"

Verskeie Doodseters sis.

"Jy sê sy naam?" fluister Bellatrix.

"Ja," sê Harry, wat die glasballetjie styf vasklem ingeval sy dit weer uit sy greep probeer toor. "Ja, ek het geen probleem met Wol-"

"Hou jou snater!" skree Bellatrix. "Hoe durf jy sy naam op jou onwaardige lippe neem? Hoe durf jy dit besmet met jou halfbloedtong, hoe durf -"

"Het jy geweet dat hy ook 'n halfbloed is?" vra Harry roekeloos en Hermien kreun agter hom. "Ja - Woldemort! Sy ma was 'n heks, maar sy pa was 'n Moggel - of het hy vir julle gesê hy's 'n volbloed?"

"BEDWE-"

"NEE!"

'n Rooi ligstraal het uit die punt van Bellatrix Lestrangle se towerstaf geskiet, maar Malfoy het dit onderskep. Dit skram weg en tref die rak 'n entjie bo Harry se kop. Verskeie glasballe spat aan skerwe.

Twee figure, pêrelwit soos spoke en vloeibaar soos rook, dwarrel uit die glasskerwe op die vloer en begin gelyk praat sodat net gedeeltes van wat hulle sê bo Bellatrix en Malfoy se krete hoorbaar is.

"... teen die sonstilstand kom 'n nuwe . . ." sê die figuur van 'n ou bebaarde man.

"MOENIE AANVAL NIE! ONS MOET DIE PROFESIE KRY!"

"Hy waag - hy waag dit -" skree Bellatrix onsamehangend, "hy staan daar - vieslike halfbloed -"

"WAG TOT ONS DIE PROFESIE HET!" brul Malfoy.

"... en niemand sal daarna . . ." sê die figuur van 'n jong vrou.

Die twee figure wat uit die gebreekte balle gebars het, warrel weg. Net die glasskerwe bly op die vloer oor, maar dit het Harry 'n idee gegee. Die probleem is om sy idee aan die ander oor te dra.

"Julle het nog nie vir my gesê wat so spesiaal aan hierdie profesie

is dat ek dit vir julle moet gee nie," sê hy in 'n poging om tyd te wen. Hy skuif sy voet stadig sywaarts op soek na iemand anders s'n.

"Moenie speletjies speel nie, Potter," sis Malfoy.

"Ek speel nie speletjies nie," sê Harry, wie se aandag verdeel is tussen die gesprek en sy bewegende voet. Dan vind hy dit: iemand anders se skoen. Hy trap ongemerk op die tone en Hermien trek haar asem skerp in.

"Wat?" fluister sy.

"Het Dompeldorius nooit vir jou gesê dat die rede vir daardie litteken diep in die Departement vir Geheime gebêre word nie, Potter?" snou Malfoy.

"Ek – wat?" Harry vergeet vir 'n oomblik skoon van sy plan. "Wat van my litteken?"

"Wat?" fluister Hermien dringend agter hom.

"Kan dit waar wees?" Malfoy lag snedig en van die ander Doodseters lag ook. Harry gebruik die geleentheid om onderlangs vir Hermien te sis sonder om sy lippe te roer: "Breek rakke –"

"Dompeldorius het nooit vir jou gesê nie?" herhaal Malfoy. "Wel, dit verklaar hoekom jy nie vroeër gekom het nie, Potter. Die Donker Heer het gewonder –"

"– as ek sê nou –"

"– hoekom jy nie gekom het toe hy die plek waar dit weggesteek word in jou drome vir jou gewys het nie. Hy het gedink jou ingebore nuuskierigheid sal veroorsaak dat jy die presiese bewoording –"

"Het hy?" Harry weet dat Hermien die boodskap agter sy rug vir die ander aanstuur en dat hy moet aanhou praat om die Doodseters se aandag af te lei. "Dan wou hy hê ek moet dit kom haal? Hoekom?"

"Hoekom?" Malfoy klink ongelooflik in sy skik. "Want die enigste mens wat 'n profesie uit die Departement vir Geheime mag neem, Potter, is die persoon oor wie dit gemaak is. Soos die Donker Heer uitgevind het toe hy andere gevra het om dit vir hom te steel."

"En hoekom wil hy 'n profesie oor my steel?"

"Oor albei van julle, Potter, oor albei van julle. Het jy al ooit gewonder hoekom die Donker Heer jou as baba wou doodmaak?"

Harry staar na die skrefies in Malfoy se masker en sien sy glinsterende grys oë. Is hierdie profesie die rede vir Harry se ouers se dood en die rede vir sy weerligstraallitteken? Hou hy die antwoord op hierdie vrae in sy hand?

"Iemand het 'n profesie oor Woldemort en my gemaak?" sê hy nadruklik terwyl hy vir Lucius Malfoy dophou, sy vingers stewig

gesluit om die warm glasballetjie in sy hand. Dis 'n bietjie groter as 'n Snip en nog steeds baie stowwerig. "En hy wou my hierheen lok om dit vir hom te gee? Hoekom het hy dit nie self kom haal nie?"

"Self kom haal?" kryns Bellatrix Lestrange en sy kekkellag waansinnig. "Sal die Donker Heer so dwaas wees om by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns in te stap terwyl hulle so gaaf is om sy terugkoms te ignoreer? Sal die Donker Heer hom aan die Aurors opdring terwyl hulle hul tyd op my liewe neef verspil?"

"Dan moet julle sy vuilwerk vir hom doen?" vra Harry. "Soos hy vir Sturgis probeer dwing het – en vir Bodus?"

"Baie mooi, Potter, baie mooi..." sê Malfoy stadig. "Maar die Donker Heer weet dat jy nie onintelligent..."

"NOU!" skree Harry.

Agter hom brul vyf stemme: "**REDUCTO!**" Vyf paljasse trek in vyf verskillende rigtings en die rakke oorkant hulle ontplof onder die impak sodat die enorme strukture wild heen en weer swaai. Honderde glasballe bars oop, pêrelwit figure dwarrel deur die lug en hul stemme eggo uit die verlede, en 'n stortvloed brekende glas en versplinterende hout reën op die vloer neer.

"**HARDLOOP!**" skree Harry terwyl die rakke gevaarlik swaai en nog glasballe afval. Hy gryp Hermien se kleed en trek haar vorentoe en hou sy ander arm oor sy kop teen die vallende brokstukke. 'n Doodseter duik deur die wolk glas en stof en Harry stamp hom in die gesig met sy elmboog. Almal skree. Daar is pynkrete en 'n dawerende geraas soos rakke teen mekaar val en die anderwêreldse stemme van Sieners uit hul glasballe vrygelaat word.

Die pad is skoon voor Harry. Hy sien hoe Ron, Ginny en Mania met hul arms oor hul koppe verby hom nael. Iets swaars tref hom teen die kant van sy gesig, maar hy skud sy kop en nael verder. Dan voel hy 'n hand op sy skouer, maar Hermien skree "**Bedwelm!**" en die hand los hom onmiddellik.

Hulle is aan die end van ry sewe-en-negentig. Harry swenk na regs en lê nieme neer. Hy hoor voetvalle agter hom en Hermien se stem wat vir Neville aanpor. Die deur waardeur hulle ingekom het, staan op 'n skrefte oop en Harry sien die glinsterende lig wat uit die klokglas in die vertrek langsaan straal. Hy storm oor die drumpel, die profesie nog steeds veilig in sy hand, wag vir Hermien en Neville en slaan die deur agter hulle toe.

"*Colloportus!*" snak Hermien en die deur verseel vanself met 'n vreemde plagseluid.

"Waar – waar is die res?" vra Harry.

Hy het gedink Ron, Mania en Ginny is voor hulle en dat hulle reeds in hierdie vertrek wag, maar daar is niemand nie.

"Hulle moet na die verkeerde kant gehardloop het," fluister Hermien beangs.

"Luister," fluister Neville.

Voetstappe en krete klink agter die deur op wat hulle so pas verseel het. Harry hou sy oor daarteen en hoor hoe Lucius Malfoy brul: "Los vir Nott, los hom, sê ek – sy besering is nietig teen die verlies van die profesie. Jugson, kom terug, ons moet organiseer! Verdeel in pare en begin soek, en moenie vergeet nie, werk sagkens met Potter tot ons die profesie het. Julle kan solank die res doodmaak, indien nodig – Bellatrix, Rodolphus, gaan na links; Krabbe, Rabastan, na regs; Jugson, Dolohov, die deur daar voor; Macnair en Avery, hierlangs; Rookwood, daar oorkant – Mulciber, jy kom saam met my!"

"Wat maak ons nou?" vra Hermien bewend vir Harry.

"Ons moet padgee van hierdie deur, ons kan nie hier staan en wag tot hulle ons kry nie."

Hulle hardloop verby die glinsterende klokglas waarin die eiertjie om die beurt uitbroei en terugbroei, na die deur aan die oorkant van die vertrek wat na die ronde kamer lei. Hulle is amper daar toe Harry iets groots en swaars hoor bots teen die deur wat Hermien toegetoor het.

"Staan opsy!" sê 'n growwe stem. "Alohomara!"

Die deur vlieg oop en Harry, Hermien en Neville duik onder die tafels in. Hulle sien die some van die klede van twee Doodseters wat haastig nader kom.

"Dalk het hulle reguit voorportaal toe gehardloop," sê die growwe stem.

"Kyk onder die tafels," sê 'n tweede stem.

Harry sien hoe die Doodseters se knieë knak. Hy steek sy towerstaf onder die tafel uit en skree: "BEDWELM!"

'n Straal rooi lig tref die naaste Doodseter en hy val agteroor teen 'n staanklok sodat dit omslaan. Die tweede een spring blitsig uit die pad en vermy Harry se paljas. Hy rig sy towerstaf op Hermien, wat onder die tafel uitkruip om beter te kan mik.

"Avada –"

Harry spring oor die vloer en gryp die Doodseter om sy knieë. Die man slaan neer en sy vloek trek skadeloos deur die vertrek. Neville keer 'n lessenaar om in sy haas om Harry te hulp te snel, rig sy towerstaf wildweg op die worstelende paar en skree: "EXPPELLIARMUS!"

Sowel Harry as die Doodseter se towerstawwe vlieg uit hul hande

en seil na die ingang van die Saal van Profesieë. Hulle skarrel gelyk op en sit die towerstawwe agterna, die Doodseter voor en Harry op sy hakke, met Neville, verskrik oor wat hy aangevang het, heel agter.

"Gee pad, Harry!" skree Neville, desperaat om die skade te herstel.

Harry duik eenkant toe en Neville korrel en skree: "BEDWELM!"

Die rooi ligstraal trek oor die Doodseter se skouer en tref 'n vertoonkas vol uurglase teen die muur. Die kas val om, bars oop en glas spat oor die vloer, maar dan spring dit weer terug teen die muur, heeltemal ongeskonde, net om weer te val en te breek –

Die Doodseter raap sy towerstaf op wat op die vloer langs die glinsterende klokglas gelê het en Harry koes agter 'n tafel weg toe hy omswaai. Maar die man se masker het geskuif en hy kan niks sien nie. Hy ruk dit met sy vry hand af en skree: "BEDWE–"

"BEDWELM!" gil Hermien, wat hulle pas ingehaal het. Die rooi ligstraal tref die Doodseter teen die bors en hy vries, sy arm nog steeds in die lug. Sy towerstaf val kletterend op die vloer en hy val agteroor teen die klokglas. Harry verwag om 'n harde *klonk* te hoor en te sien hoe die man teen die soliede glas afgly vloer toe, maar dit gebeur nie. Pleks daarvan gly sy kop deur die kant van die klokglas asof dit 'n blote seepbel is en hy val op sy rug op die tafel neer met sy kop binne-in die klokglas vol glinsterende wind.

"Accio towerstaf!" skree Hermien. Harry se towerstaf vlieg uit 'n donker hoek na haar hand en sy gooi dit vir hom.

"Dankie! Ons moet padgee –"

"Pas op!" skree Neville verskrik. Hy staar na die Doodseter, wie se kop nog steeds in die klokglas is.

Hulle lig weer hul towerstawwe, maar niemand slaan toe nie. Almal staar oopmond na die ongelukkige man.

Sy kop is besig om te krimp. Al sy hare trek terug in sy kopvel en wange en raak weg, sy wange word glad, sy skedel rond en bedek met sagte dons.

Nou pryk 'n baba se kop op die Doodseter se dik, gespierde nek. Hy sukkel orent, maar voor Harry-hulle se geskokte oë swel sy kop weer tot die normale grootte en ruie swart hare groei uit sy kopvel en ken . . .

"Dis Tyd," sê Hermien verwonderd. "Tyd . . ."

Die Doodseter skud sy lelike kop asof hy probeer uitwerk wat aangaan, maar voor hy iets kan doen, begin sy kop weer krimp.

Daar is 'n kreet in die verrek langsaan, 'n harde slag en 'n geskree.

"RON?" skree Harry en draai weg van die monsteragtige transformasie wat voor hulle oë afspeel. "GINNY? MANIA?"

"Harry!" skree Hermien.

Die Doodseter het sy kop uit die klokglas gehaal. Hy lyk verskriklik grillig. Sy donsige babakoppie skreeu oorverdowend terwyl sy dik arms wild swaai en Harry rakelings mis. Harry koes en lig sy towerstaf, maar Hermien gryp sy arm.

"Jy kan nie 'n baba toor nie!"

Daar is nie tyd om te stry nie. Hulle hoor voetstappe wat al harder word in die Saal van Profesieë en Harry besef te laat hy het hul posisie verraaï toe hy na Ron-hulle geroep het.

"Kom!" sê hy en hulle nael na die deur aan die oorkant van die vertrek. Dit staan oop en lei na die ronde swart vertrek.

Hulle is amper daar toe Harry twee Doodseters deur die oop deur na hulle toe sien aankom. Hy swenk na links, storm na 'n klein, donker, deurmekaar kantoortjie en slaan die deur agter hulle toe.

"Collo-" begin Hermien, maar voor sy die spreuk kan voltooi, bars die deur oop. Die twee Doodseters storm in en skreeu triomfantlik: "IMPEDIMENTA!"

Harry, Hermien en Neville word agtertoe geslinger. Neville seil oor die lessenaar en verdwyn uit sig, Hermien steier tot teen 'n boekrak en 'n duisternis boeke tuimel oor haar, en Harry se agterkop tref die klipmuur agter hom. Liggies ontplof voor sy oë en vir 'n oomblik is hy te dronk en deurmekaar om te reageer.

"ONS HET HOM!" skree die Doodseter naaste aan Harry. "IN 'N KANTOOR LANGS -"

"Silencio!" gil Hermien en die man se stem verdwyn. Hy prewel nog steeds deur die spleet in sy masker, maar maak nie 'n geluid nie. Sy makker stoot hom uit die pad.

"Petrificus totalus!" skree Harry toe die tweede Doodseter sy towerstaf lig. Die Doodseter se arms en bene klap teen mekaar en hy val vooroor dat hy gesig eerste op die mat voor Harry se voete lê, so styf soos 'n plank en nie in staat om 'n lit te roer nie.

"Skote, Har-"

Maar die Doodseter wat Hermien pas stil getoor het, maak 'n onverwagse beweging met sy towerstaf. 'n Pers streep flits oor Hermien se bors en 'n verbaasde geluidjie glip oor haar lippe voor sy neersyg en bewegingloos bly lê.

"HERMIEN!"

Harry val op sy knieë langs haar neer terwyl Neville vinnig van agter die lessenaar oor die vloer na haar kruip, sy towerstaf uitgestrek voor hom. Die Doodseter haak af en skop na Neville se kop.

Sy voet tref eers Neville se towerstaf, wat middeldeur breek, en toe sy gesig. Neville gee 'n pynkreet en gryp na sy mond en neus. Harry swaai om, sy towerstaf gereed voor hom. Die Doodseter het sy masker afgepluk en sy towerstaf is op Harry gerig. Harry herken die lang, bleek gesig wat hy in die *Daaglikse Profeet* gesien het: Antonin Dolohov, die towenaar wat die Prewetts vermoor het.

Dolohov grinnik. Hy beduie met sy vry hand na die profesie in Harry se hand, dan na homself en dan na Hermien. Hoewel hy nie 'n woord kan sê nie, is sy bedoeling duidelik: gee die profesie vir my of jy kry wat sy gekry het.

"Asof jy ons nie sal doodmaak die oomblik dat ek dit vir jou gee nie!" sê Harry.

Hy is so paniekbevange dat hy skaars kan dink. Hy hou een hand op Hermien se skouer, wat nog steeds warm is, maar hy durf nie na haar kyk nie. *Gee dat sy nog lewe, gee dat sy nog lewe, dis my skuld as sy dood is.*

"Wad jy ook al doet, Haddy," sê Neville en laat sak sy hande dat Harry sy gebreekte neus en bebloede mond duidelik kan sien, "jy gee did nie vi' hom nie!"

Daar is 'n slag buite die deur en Dolohov kyk om. Die Doodseter met die babakop staan in die kosyn. Sy kop skree soos 'n baba en sy groot vuiste swaai onbeheerbaar na alles om hom. Harry gebruik die kans.

"PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!"

Die paljas tref Dolohov voor hy dit kan afweer en hy val oor sy kameraad, albei stokstyf en nie in staat om 'n vinger te roer nie.

"Hermien!" sê Harry en skud haar terwyl die Doodseter met die babakop skreeuend wegstrompel. "Hermien, word wakker."

"Wadded hy aan haa' heden?" vra Neville. Hy kruip onder die lessenaar uit en kniel langs haar. Bloed stroom uit sy neus, wat nou vinnig opswel.

"Weet nie."

Neville vat Hermien se gewrig.

"Hie's 'n pols, Haddy. Ek is seke'."

Harry se kop voel dronk van verligting.

"Sy lewe?"

"Ja, ek dingk so."

In die stilte wat volg, luister Harry fyn vir die geluid van nog voetstappe, maar al wat hy hoor, is die gekerm en rondvallery van die Doodseter met die babakop in die vertrek langsaan.

"Neville, ons kan nie ver van die uitgang wees nie," fluister hy. "Ons is langs die ronde kamer... as jy daar kan kom en die regte

deur kan kry voor hier nog Doodseters opdaag, is ek seker jy sal vir Hermien in die hyser kan kry. Dan kan jy iemand gaan soek en alarm maak . . . ”

“En wad gaan jy miskien doen?” Neville vee met sy mou oor sy bloeiende neus en kyk fronsend na Harry.

“Ek gaan die ander soek .”

“Wel, ek kom saam med jou,” sê Neville beslis.

“Maar Hermien – ”

“Ons neem haa’ ook. Ek sal haa’ dra – jy veg beder as ek – ”

Hy staan op, gryp een van Hermien se arms en gluur na Harry, wat eers aarsel, maar toe haar ander arm vat en vir Neville help om Hermien se dooie gewig oor sy skouers te trek.

“Wag.” Harry tel Hermien se towerstaf op en druk dit in Neville se hand. “Neem dit.”

Neville skop sy stukkende towerstaf weg terwyl hulle deur toe sukkel. “My ouma gaa’ my vermoo’,” sê hy in ’n dik stem, “did was my pa se ou to’erstaf.”

Harry steek sy kop om die deur en kyk versigtig rond. Die Doodseter met die babakop strompel huilend rond en loop in goed vas. Staanklokke en lessenaars tuimel om en die glasvertoonkas teen die muur, wat Harry vermoed vol Tyddraaiers is, is nog steeds besig om oor en oor te val en op te staan.

“Hy sal ons nie sien nie,” fluister hy. “Kom, loop direk agter my . . . ”

Hulle kruip uit die kantoor na die deur wat na die swart vertrek lei. Dit lyk of die swart vertrek heeltmal verlate is. Hulle gee nog ’n paar tree, terwyl Neville se knieë effens swik onder Hermien se gewig. Die Tydkamer agter hulle se deur swaai toe en die vertrek begin weer draai. Dis of die hou wat Harry teen die kop gekry het sy balans versteur het. Sy oë is op skrefies en hy swaai dronkerig op sy bene tot die mure weer stilstaan. Dis met ’n sinkende gevoel dat hy sien Hermien se vurige kruise het verdwyn.

“Waarheen dink jy – ?”

Maar voor hulle kan besluit by watter deur hulle moet ingaan, vlieg die een aan hul regterkant oop en drie mense val daardeur.

“Ron!” krys Harry en storm nader. “Ginny – is julle oukei?”

“Harry . . . ” Ron giggel floutjies en gee ’n paar struikelende tree vorentoe. Hy gryp die voorkant van Harry se kleed en staar met ongefokuste oë na hom. “So hier is jy . . . ha-ha-ha . . . jy lyk snaaks, Harry . . . so slordig . . . ”

Ron se gesig is baie bleek en iets donkers drup uit die hoek van sy mond. Die volgende oomblik swik sy knieë, maar hy klou nog

steeds aan Harry se kleed vas sodat Harry gedwing word om oor hom te buk.

“Ginny?” vra Harry benoud. “Wat het gebeur?”

Maar Ginny skud net haar kop en skuif teen die muur af tot sy in ’n sittende posisie is. Sy haal swaar asem en hou haar enkel vas.

“Ek dink sy’t haar enkel gebreek, ek het iets hoor kraak,” fluister Mania wat oor haar buig. Skynbaar is sy die enigste een van die drie wat ongedeerd is. “Vier van hulle het ons in ’n donker kamer vol planete gejaag. Dit was ’n verskriklik snaakse plek. Ons het soms net in die donkerte rondgesweef –”

“Harry, ons was by Uranus!” sê Ron wat nog steeds floutjies giggel. “Het jy gehoor, Harry? Ons was by Uranus – ha-ha-ha –”

’n Borrel bloed vorm in die hoek van Ron se mond en bars oop.

– en een van hulle het Ginny se voet gegryp. Ek het die Verkleinvloek gebruik en Pluto in sy gesig opgeblaas, maar . . .”

Mania wys magteloos na Ginny, wat vlak asemhaal, haar oë styf toegeknyp.

“Wat van Ron?” vra Harry angstig. Ron hang nog steeds giggelend aan sy kleed.

“Ek weet nie wat hom getref het nie,” sê Mania bekommerd, “maar hy’t ’n bietjie mal geword, ek kon hom skaars tot hier kry.”

“Harry,” sê Ron en trek Harry se kop nader, “weet jy wie dit is, Harry? Dis Mallie . . . Mallie Goedlief . . . ha-ha-ha . . .”

“Ons moet maak dat ons wegkom,” sê Harry beslis. “Mania, kan jy vir Ginny help?”

“Ja.” Mania druk haar towerstaf agter haar oor in, slaan ’n arm om Ginny se middel en help haar orient.

“Dis net my enkel, ek kan self!” sê Ginny ongeduldig, maar haar bene gee mee en sy val teen Mania en gryp wild na haar. Harry trek Ron se arm oor sy skouer net soos hy maande gelede met Dudley gedoen het. Hy kyk rond. Hulle het ’n kans van een uit twaalf om die uitgang met die eerste probeerslag te kry.

Hy sleepdra Ron na ’n deur. Hulle is ’n paar tree daarvandaan toe ’n ander deur oopbars en drie Doodseters instorm, Bellatrix Lestrange heel voor.

“Daar is hulle!” skree sy.

Bedwelmspreuke vlieg deur die vertrek. Harry stamp die deur voor hom oop, slinger Ron binnetoe en spring weer terug om vir Neville met Hermien te help. Hulle is net betyds oor die drumpel om die deur in Bellatrix se gesig toe te slaan.

“Colloportus!” skree Harry net toe die drie Doodseters in die deur vashardloop.

“Moenie worrie nie!” sê ’n manstem aan die ander kant. “Daar is ander maniere om in te kom – ONS HET HULLE! HULLE IS HIER!”

Harry tol om. Hulle is weer in die Breinkamer en daar is deure regom die vertrek teen al die mure. Hy hoor voetstappe in die vertrek agter hulle soos nog Doodseters aangehardloop kom.

“Mania – Neville – help my!”

Hulle nael deur die vertrek en verseël die deure so ver as hulle gaan. Harry hardloop in ’n tafel vas en tuimel daaroor in sy haas om by die volgende deur te kom.

“Colloportus!”

Hulle hoor voetstappe agter die deure en elke nou en dan tref ’n swaar liggaam ’n deur sodat dit sidder en kraak. Mania en Neville is besig om die deure teen die oorkantste muur te toor. Net toe Harry aan die bopunt van die vertrek kom, hoor hy vir Mania skree:

“Collo- aaaaaaarg!”

Hy swaai om en sien hoe sy deur die lug trek terwyl vyf Doodseters na binne swerm. Mania tref ’n tafel, gly daaroor, val aan die ander kant af en bly doodstil lê.

“Kry vir Potter!” skree Bellatrix terwyl sy na hom hardloop. Hy ontwyk haar en nael deur die vertrek. Hy weet hy is veilig solank hulle bang is dat hulle die profesie kan tref.

“Haai!” sê Ron, wat orent gesukkel het en nou dronkerig en giggelend na Harry strompel. “Haai, Harry, daar’s breine hierin, ha-ha-ha, dis snaaks, hê, Harry?”

“Ron, gee pad, lê plat!”

Maar Ron het reeds sy towerstaf op die tenk gerig. “Regtig, Harry, dis breine – kyk – *Accio brein!*”

Vir ’n oomblik roer niemand nie. Harry, Ginny, Neville en al die Doodseters staar vasgenael na die tenk. ’n Brein bars soos ’n vlieënde vis uit die groen vloeistof, huiwer ’n oomblik in die lug en seil dan na Ron. Lang linte vol bewegende beelde rol soos film daaruit –

“Ha-ha-ha, kyk, Harry, kyk!” sê Ron. “Kom vat hieraan. Ek wed dis grillerig –”

“RON, MOENIE!”

Harry weet nie wat sal gebeur as Ron aan die gedagtetentakels raak wat nou agter die brein aanvlieg nie, maar hy is seker dit gaan nie iets goeds wees nie. Hy nael na hom, maar Ron steek sy arms uit en vang die brein in sy hande.

Die oomblik toe die tentakels aan Ron se vel raak, begin hulle soos toue om sy arms draai.

“Harry, kyk wat gaan aan – nee – nee – dis nie lekker nie – nee, hou op – hou op!”

Die dun linte vleg nou om Ron se borskas. Hy probeer hulle losskeur, maar hulle trek die brein styf teen hom soos ’n seekat se lyf.

“Diffindo!” skree Harry in ’n poging om die voelers se greep om Ron te breek, maar dit werk nie en Ron slaan worstelend op die vloer neer.

“Harry, dit gaan hom versmoor!” skree Ginny, wat met haar gebreekte enkel nie kan roer nie. ’n Rooi ligstraal flits uit een van die Doodseters se towerstawwe en tref haar vol in die gesig. Sy val eenkant toe en bly bewusteloos lê.

“BEBWELM!” skree Neville en swaai Hermien se towerstaf na die aanstormende Doodseters. “BEBWELM! BEBWELM!”

Niks gebeur nie.

Een van die Doodseters stuur ’n Bedwelmpaljas na Neville, wat hom net-net mis. Dis nou net Harry en Neville teen vyf Doodseters. Twee van die Doodseters stuur strome silwer lig soos pyle na hulle. Dit mis hulle rakelings en maak kraters in die muur agter hulle. Harry laat spaander toe Bellatrix Lestrange op hom afpyl. Hy hou die profesie hoog bo sy kop in die hoop dat hy die Doodseters op hierdie manier van sy maats sal weglok.

Dit lyk of dit werk, want hulle sit hom agterna. Tafels en stoele vlieg deur die lug, maar niemand waag dit om hom te toor nie ingeval hulle die profesie tref. Hy nael na die enigste deur wat nog oop is, die een waardeur die Doodseters die vertrek binnegekrom het, terwyl hy stilweg bid dat Neville by Ron sal bly en hom op die een of ander manier sal bevry. Hy storm die vertrek binne en voel hoe die vloer onder sy voete verdwyn –

Hy val met steil trappe af ondertoe, bons op elke vlak en land eindelik met ’n harde slag wat sy asem wegslaan op sy rug in die versionke arena waar die klippoort op die platform staan. Die hele vertrek weergalm soos die Doodseters lag. Hy kyk op en sien hoe die vyfstuks wat in die Breinkamer was op hom afpyl, terwyl heel-party meer Doodseters by die ander deure inkom en van klipbank na klipbank ondertoe in sy rigting spring. Harry kom orent. Sy bene bewes sô dat hy skaars regop kan staan. Die profesie is wonder bo wonder nog steeds ongeskaad in sy linkerhand en sy towerstaf is in sy regterhand vasgekleem. Terwyl hy retireer, kyk hy rond in ’n poging om al die Doodseters in die oog te hou. Die agterkante van sy bene tref iets solieds: die platform waarop die poort staan. Hy klim agteruit daarop.

Die Doodseters steek vas en staar na hom. Party van hulle blaas net so hard soos hy en een bloei kwaai. Dolohov, wat nie meer deur die Stywelywe-vloek gebind is nie, grynslag vir Harry, sy towerstaf op Harry se gesig gerig.

“Dis verby, Potter,” sê Lucius Malfoy dralend en haal sy masker af. “Gee die profesie soos ’n soet seun vir my.”

“Laat – laat my maats gaan, dan sal ek dit gee,” sê Harry desperaat. ’n Paar Doodseters lag.

“Dis nie vir jou om voorwaardes te stel nie, Potter.” Malfoy se bleek gesig word pienk van genot. “Jy sien, daar is tien van ons en net een van jou . . . of het Dompeldorius jou nooit leer tel nie?”

“Hy’s nie addeen nie!” skree ’n stem van bo af. “Hy hed nog vi’ my!”

Harry se hart sink. Neville skarrel af met die kliptrappe, Hermien se towerstaf in sy bewende hand.

“Neville – nee – gaan terug na Ron –”

“BEBWELM!” skree Neville en rig sy towerstaf om die beurt op die Doodseters. “BEBWELM! BEBWE-!”

Een van die grootste Doodseters gryp Neville van agter en pen sy arms teen sy lyf vas. Hy skop en stoei en ’n hele paar Doodseters lag.

“Dis Loggerenberg, nè?” snou Lucius Malfoy. “Wel, jou ouma is daaraan gewoond om familieledede ter wille van ons saak te verloor . . . jou dood sal nie vir haar ’n groot skok wees nie.”

“Loggerenberg?” herhaal Bellatrix en ’n besonder gemene glimlag speel oor haar uitgeteerde gesig. “Ek het die voorreg gehad om jou ouers te ken, boet.”

“EK WEE’ DID!” skree Neville en hy versit hom sô hewig teen sy gevangenermer se greep dat die Doodseter brul: “Iemand, Bedwelms hom!”

“Nee, nee, nee.” Bellatrix kyk met ’n uitdrukking van vervoering van Neville na Harry. “Nee, kom ons kyk hoe lank Loggerenberg kan uithou voor hy ook soos sy pappie en mammié van sy kop af gaan . . . tensy Potter die profesie vir ons wil gee.”

“MOEDIDIE VI’ HULLE GEE NIE, HADDY!” brul Neville buite homself van woede. Hy spartel en skop terwyl Bellatrix met haar towerstaf uitgestrek na hom stap. “MOEDIDIE GEE NIE, HADDY!”

Bellatrix rig haar towerstaf op hom. “Crucio!”

Neville skree en sy bene trek teen sy borskas op sodat die Doodseter wat hom beet het hom ’n oomblik in die lug hou. Die Doodseter laat los en Neville val stuiptrekkend en skreeuend van pyn op die vloer.

“Dit was net ’n voorsmakie,” sê Bellatrix en lig haar towerstaf. Neville se krete bedaar en hy bly snikkend voor haar voete lê. Sy

draai om en staar na Harry. "Goed, Potter, gee die profesie vir ons, of kyk hoe jou maatjie op die swaar manier sterf."

Harry hoef nie daaroor te dink nie. Daar is geen keuse nie. Die profesie is warm van sy greep toe hy dit na hulle uithou. Malfoy spring nader om dit te vat.

Hoog bo hulle bars twee deure oop en nog vyf mense storm die vertrek binne: Sirius, Lupin, Moodie, Tonks en Kingsley.

Malfoy kyk om en lig sy towerstaf, maar Tonks het reeds 'n Bedwelpaljas na hom gestuur. Harry wag nie om te sien of dit raak is nie, maar duik van die platform af. Die Doodseters is heeltemal verwar deur die verskyning van die lede van die Orde, wat paljasse op hulle laat reën terwyl hulle van klipbank tot klipbank ondertoe spring. Harry sien deur die dartelende liggame en ligflitse hoe Neville eenkant toe kruip. Hy ontwyk 'n rooi ligstraal en gooi hom plat op die vloer langs Neville.

"Is jy oukei?" skree hy toe nog 'n spreuk hulle rakelings mis.

"Ja." Neville probeer orent kom.

"En Ron?"

"Ek dingk hy's oukei – hy'd nog meddie bwein geveg toe ek daa' weg is."

Die klipvloer onder hulle ontplof toe 'n vloek dit tref en daar's 'n krater waar Neville se hand 'n oomblik gelede was. Hulle skarrel vinnig weg, maar 'n sterk arm kom van nêrens, gryp Harry om die nek en trek hom orent sodat sy tone amper nie aan die grond raak nie.

"Gee dit hier," grom 'n stem in sy oor. "Gee die profesie vir my –"

Die man het Harry se gorrel in só 'n greep dat hy nie kan asem kry nie. Hy sien deur sy trane hoe Sirius tien tree verder teen 'n Doodseter veg en Kingsley teen twee, terwyl Tonks halfpad af teen die trappe spreuke op Bellatrix afvuur. Niemand weet dat Harry besig is om te sterf nie. Hy kry dit reg om sy towerstaf op die man se sy te rig, maar hy kan nie 'n woord uitkry nie. Die man se los hand tas na die profesie wat Harry nog steeds styf vashou.

"AAAARG!"

Neville het Hermien se towerstaf deur die spleet in die man se masker gestee en 'n oog getref. Die Doodseter uiter 'n kreet van pyn en laat Harry los. Harry swaai om en hyg: "BEDWELM!"

Die man val agteroor en sy masker skuif weg. Dis Macnair, die man wat vir Bokbok moes teregstel. Sy linkeroog is geswel en bloedbelope.

"Dankie!" sê Harry vir Neville en ruk hom uit die pad toe Sirius en sy Doodseter verbystorm. Hulle is in so 'n verwoede stryd

gewikkel dat hul towerstawwe soos warrelings lyk. Harry trap op iets wat rond en hard is en sy voet gly. Vir 'n oomblik is hy bang dis die profesie wat hy laat val het, maar dan sien hy hoe Moodie se magiese oog oor die vloer tol.

Sy eienaar lê op sy sy en sy kop bloei. Sy aanvaller storm nou na Harry en Neville. Dis Dolohov, sy lang bleek gesig vertrek van genot.

"*Tarantallegra!*" skree hy en rig sy towerstaf op Neville, wie se bene dadelik waansinnig begin dans sodat hy sy balans verloor en weer val. "Nou vir jou, Potter –"

Hy maak dieselfde afwaartse beweging met sy towerstaf wat hy op Hermien gebruik het, toe Harry "*Protego!*" skree.

Harry voel hoe iets soos 'n stomp lem oor sy gesig gly. Die geweld daarvan slaan hom sywaarts en hy val oor Neville se spastiese bene, maar sy Skildspreuk het daarin geslaag om die vloek af te weer.

Weer lig Dolohov sy towerstaf. "*Accio profe-*"

Sirius loop vir Dolohov soos 'n stormram met sy skouer uit die grond en hy vlieg deur die lug. Die profesie gly tot op Harry se vingerpunte en hy kry sy greep net-net terug. Nou veg Sirius en Dolohov, hul towerstawwe flits soos swaarde en vonke vlieg uit die punte.

Dolohov trek sy towerstaf terug en maak dieselfde kapbeweging wat hy op Harry en Hermien gebruik het. Harry spring op en skree: "*Petrificus totalus!*" Dolohov se arms en bene spring weer teen mekaar, hy val agteroor en land met 'n slag op sy rug.

"Skotel!" skree Sirius en druk Harry se kop plat toe 'n paar Bedwelmers op hulle afpyl. "Julle twee moet padgee –"

Hulle koes weer. 'n Groen ligstraal het Sirius rakelings gemis. Harry sien hoe Tonks se slap liggaam by die kliptrappe afval terwyl 'n triomfantlike Bellatrix terugnael om verder te veg.

"Harry, vat die profesie en vir Neville en maak dat julle wegkom!" gil Sirius en storm op Bellatrix af. Harry sien nie wat gebeur nie omdat Kingsley op daardie oomblik voor hom inbeweeg. Hy veg teen Rookwood, wat nie meer 'n kap ophet nie sodat sy pokkegesig duidelik sigbaar is. 'n Groen ligstraal flits oor Harry se kop toe hy na Neville duik.

"Kan jy staan?" skree hy in Neville se oor. Sy bene ruk nog steeds onbeheers. "Sit jou arm om my nek –"

Neville doen dit en Harry help hom op, maar Neville se bene weier om hom te ondersteun. 'n Man duik uit die niet na hulle en hulle val agteroor. Neville se bene skop wild soos 'n omgedopte kewer s'n en Harry hou sy arm in die lug om te keer dat die glasballetjie breek.

“Die profesie, gee die profesie vir my, Potter!” skree Lucius Malfoy by Harry se oor. Harry voel hoe Malfoy die punt van sy towerstaf hard tussen sy ribbes druk.

“Nee – staan op – los my – Neville, vang!”

Harry slinger die profesie oor die vloer, Neville tol op sy rug om, gryp dit uit die lug en druk dit teen sy bors. Nou rig Malfoy sy towerstaf op Neville, maar Harry mik na hom en skree: “*Impedimental!*”

Malfoy word uit sy spore geblaas. Toe Harry orent kom, sien hy hoe Malfoy teen die platform val waarop Sirius en Bellatrix staan en veg. Malfoy rig sy towerstaf weer op Harry en Neville, maar voor hy ’n vloek kan uitspreek, verskyn Lupin tussen hulle.

“Harry, kry die ander en GAAN!”

Harry gryp Neville se skouer en tel hom op die eerste klipbank. Neville se bene rittel nog steeds te erg om sy gewig te dra. Harry span al sy kragte in en hulle klim tot op die volgende trap.

’n Paljas tref die klipbank onder Harry se hakskeen. Dit verkrummel en hy struikel en val terug tot op die onderste klipbank. Neville slaan ook neer en hy druk die profesie in sy sak.

“Komaan!” sê Harry wanhopig en rem aan Neville se kleed: “Probeer om met jou bene te stoot –”

Hy stoot weer geweldig en Neville se kleed skeur langs die linker-naat oop. Die glasballetjie val uit sy sak, maar voor een van hulle ’n hand kan uitsteek om dit te vang, tref een van Neville se spastiese voete dit: dit trek ’n goeie tien tree deur die lug en val flenters op die trap onder hulle. Terwyl hulle geskok daarna staan, styg ’n pêrel-agtige figuur met yslik vergrote oë daaruit, maar niemand anders sien haar nie, net hulle twee. Harry sien hoe haar mond beweeg, maar die geraas en geskree om hulle doof die profesie se woorde uit. Die figuur word stil en warrel weg.

“Haddy, ek’s jamme!” sê Neville met ’n vertrekte gesig. “Ek’s so jamme, Haddy, ek had nie bedoel –”

“Wat maak dit saak!” skree Harry. “Probeer net opstaan dat ons kan wegkom!”

“Dommeldoor!” sê Neville en staar oor Harry se skouer, sy sweterige gesig verheug.

“Wat?”

“DOMMELDOOR!”

Harry kyk om om te sien waarna Neville kyk. Reg bo hulle, afgeteken in die deur voor die Breinkamer, staan Albus Dompeldorius met sy towerstaf in die lug en sy gesig wit van woede. Harry voel hoe ’n soort elektriese lading deur sy liggaam skiet. Hulle is veilig –

Dompeldorius beweeg vinnig met die trappe af verby Neville en

Harry, wat nou nie meer droom van padgee nie. Hy is aan die voet van die trappe voor die eerste Doodseters besef wat aangaan en die ander kan waarsku. Een van die Doodseters slaan op die vlug en skarrel soos 'n aap met die oorkantste trappe op. Dompeldorius se paljas raap hom met gemak terug asof hy hom met 'n onsigbare hoek en 'n onsigbare lyn gevang het.

Net een paar veg nog, oënskynlik onbewus van die nuwe aankomeling. Harry sien hoe Sirius Bellatrix se rooi ligstraal ontwyk en haar uitlag.

"Komaan, jy's darem seker tot meer in staat!" skree hy, sy stem galmend deur die spelonkagtige vertrek.

Die tweede ligstraal tref hom vol teen die bors.

Sy gelag sterf weg en sy oë word wyd van skok.

Harry los vir Neville sonder dat hy besef wat hy doen. Hy ruk sy towerstaf uit en spring met die trappe af net toe Dompeldorius na die platform draai.

Dit neem Sirius 'n ewigheid om te val: sy liggaam maak 'n grasiouse boog toe hy agteruit deur die toingrige sluier voor die hoë poort tuimel.

Harry sien 'n uitdrukking van vrees en verbasing op sy peetpa se vervalde gesig toe hy deur die poort trek en agter die sluier verdwyn, wat 'n oomblik wild fladder asof 'n stormwind daaroor gewaai het.

Harry hoor Bellatrix Lestrange se triomfantlike kreet, maar hy steur hom nie daaraan nie. Sirius het maar net deur die poort geval. Hy sal nou-nou aan die ander kant verskyn . . .

Maar Sirius verskyn nie.

"Sirius!" skree Harry. "SIRIUS?"

Harry nael deur die arena terwyl sy asem in sy keel brand. Sirius is agter die sluier en hy moet hom terugsleep! Dan is hy onder en hardloop na die platform, maar Lupin spring hom voor. Hy gryp Harry om sy bors en hou hom terug.

"Daar's niks wat jy kan doen nie, Harry –"

"Ek moet hom kry, ek moet hom red, hy's nou net hier deur!"

"Dis te laat, Harry –"

"Ons kan hom nog bereik," sê Harry terwyl hy hom wild teësit. As Lupin hom net wil laat los . . .

"Daar's niks wat jy kan doen nie, Harry . . . niks . . . hy is weg."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



THE ONLY ONE HE EVER FEARED

He hasn't gone!" Harry yelled.

He did not believe it, he would not believe it; still he fought Lupin with every bit of strength he had: Lupin did not understand, people hid behind that curtain, he had heard them whispering the first time he had entered the room — Sirius was hiding, simply lurking out of sight —

"SIRIUS!" he bellowed, "SIRIUS!"

"He can't come back, Harry," said Lupin, his voice breaking as he struggled to contain Harry. "He can't come back, because he's d —"

"HE — IS — NOT — DEAD!" roared Harry. "SIRIUS!"

There was movement going on around them, pointless bustling, the flashes of more spells. To Harry it was meaningless noise, the deflected curses flying past them did not matter, nothing mattered except that Lupin stop pretending that Sirius, who was standing feet from them behind that old curtain, was not going to emerge at any moment, shaking back his dark hair and eager to reenter the battle —

Lupin dragged Harry away from the dais, Harry still staring at the archway, angry at Sirius now for keeping him waiting —

But some part of him realized, even as he fought to break free from Lupin, that Sirius had never kept him waiting before. . . . Sirius had risked everything, always, to see Harry, to help him. . . . If Sirius was not reappearing out of that archway when Harry was yelling for him as though his life depended on it, the only possible explanation was that he could not come back. . . . That he really was . . .

Dumbledore had most of the remaining Death Eaters grouped in the middle of the room, seemingly immobilized by invisible ropes. Mad-Eye Moody had crawled across the room to where Tonks lay and was attempting to revive her. Behind the dais there were still flashes of light, grunts, and cries — Kingsley had run forward to continue Sirius's duel with Bellatrix.

“Harry?”

Neville had slid down the stone benches one by one to the place where Harry stood. Harry was no longer struggling against Lupin, who maintained a precautionary grip on his arm nevertheless.

“Harry . . . I'b really sorry . . .” said Neville. His legs were still dancing uncontrollably. “Was dat man — was Sirius Black a — a friend of yours?”

Harry nodded.

“Here,” said Lupin quietly, and pointing his wand at Neville’s legs he said, “*Finite*.” The spell was lifted. Neville’s legs fell back onto the floor and remained still. Lupin’s face was pale. “Let’s — let’s find the others. Where are they all, Neville?”

Lupin turned away from the archway as he spoke. It sounded as though every word was causing him pain.

“Dey’re all back dere,” said Neville. “A brain addacked Ron bud. I dink he’s all righd — and Herbione’s unconscious, bud we could feel a bulse —”

There was a loud bang and a yell from behind the dais. Harry saw Kingsley, yelling in pain, hit the ground. Bellatrix Lestrange turned tail and ran as Dumbledore whipped around. He aimed a spell at her but she deflected it. She was halfway up the steps now —

“Harry — no!” cried Lupin, but Harry had already ripped his arm from Lupin’s slackened grip.

“SHE KILLED SIRIUS!” bellowed Harry. “SHE KILLED HIM — I’LL KILL HER!”

And he was off, scrambling up the stone benches. People were shouting behind him but he did not care. The hem of Bellatrix’s robes whipped out of sight ahead and they were back in the room where the brains were swimming. . . .

She aimed a curse over her shoulder. The tank rose into the air and tipped. Harry was deluged in the foul-smelling potion within. The brains slipped and slid over him and began spinning their long, colored tentacles, but he shouted, “*Wingardium Leviosa!*” and they flew into the air away from him. Slipping and sliding he ran on

toward the door. He leapt over Luna, who was groaning on the floor, past Ginny, who said, "Harry — what — ?" past Ron, who giggled feebly, and Hermione, who was still unconscious. He wrenched open the door into the circular black hall and saw Bellatrix disappearing through a door on the other side of the room — beyond her was the corridor leading back to the lifts.

He ran, but she had slammed the door behind her and the walls had begun to rotate again. Once more he was surrounded by streaks of blue light from the whirling candelabra.

"Where's the exit?" he shouted desperately, as the wall rumbled to a halt again. "Where's the way out?"

The room seemed to have been waiting for him to ask. The door right behind him flew open, and the corridor toward the lifts stretched ahead of him, torch-lit and empty. He ran.

He could hear a lift clattering ahead of him. He sprinted up the passageway, swung around the corner, and slammed his fist onto the button to call a second lift. It jangled and banged lower and lower; the grilles slid open and Harry dashed inside, now hammering the button marked Atrium. The doors slid shut and he was rising.

He forced his way out of the lift before the grilles were fully open and looked around. Bellatrix was almost at the telephone lift at the other end of the hall, but she looked back as he sprinted toward her, and aimed another spell at him. He dodged behind the Fountain of Magical Brethren; the spell zoomed past him and hit the wrought gold gates at the other end of the Atrium so that they rang like bells. There were no more footsteps. She had stopped running. He crouched behind the statues, listening.

“*Come out, come out, little Harry!*” she called in her mock-baby voice, which echoed off the polished wooden floors. “What did you come after me for, then? I thought you were here to avenge my dear cousin!”

“I am!” shouted Harry, and a score of ghostly Harrys seemed to chorus *I am! I am! I am!* all around the room.

“Aaaaaah . . . did you *love* him, little baby Potter?”

Hatred rose in Harry such as he had never known before. He flung himself out from behind the fountain and bellowed “*Crucio!*”

Bellatrix screamed. The spell had knocked her off her feet, but she did not writhe and shriek with pain as Neville had — she was already on her feet again, breathless, no longer laughing. Harry dodged behind the golden fountain again — her counterspell hit the head of the handsome wizard, which was blown off and landed twenty feet away, gouging long scratches into the wooden floor.

“Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?” she yelled. She had abandoned her baby voice now. “You need to *mean* them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain — to enjoy it — righteous anger won’t hurt me for long — I’ll show you how it is done, shall I? I’ll give you a lesson —”

Harry had been edging around the fountain on the other side. She screamed, “*Crucio!*” and he was forced to duck down again as the centaur’s arm, holding its bow, spun off and landed with a crash on the floor a short distance from the golden wizard’s head.

“Potter, you cannot win against me!” she cried. He could hear her moving to the right, trying to get a clear shot of him. He backed around the statue away from her, crouching behind the centaur’s legs,

his head level with the house-elf's. "I was and am the Dark Lord's most loyal servant, I learned the Dark Arts from him, and I know spells of such power that you, pathetic little boy, can never hope to compete —"

"*Stupefy!*" yelled Harry. He had edged right around to where the goblin stood beaming up at the now headless wizard and taken aim at her back as she peered around the fountain for him. She reacted so fast he barely had time to duck.

"*Protego!*"

The jet of red light, his own Stunning Spell, bounced back at him. Harry scrambled back behind the fountain, and one of the goblin's ears went flying across the room.

"Potter, I am going to give you one chance!" shouted Bellatrix. "Give me the prophecy — roll it out toward me now — and I may spare your life!"

"Well, you're going to have to kill me, because it's gone!" Harry roared — and as he shouted it, pain seared across his forehead. His scar was on fire again, and he felt a surge of fury that was quite unconnected with his own rage. "And he knows!" said Harry with a mad laugh to match Bellatrix's own. "Your dear old mate Voldemort knows it's gone! He's not going to be happy with you, is he?"

"What? What do you mean?" she cried, and for the first time there was fear in her voice.

"The prophecy smashed when I was trying to get Neville up the steps! What do you think Voldemort'll say about that, then?"

His scar seared and burned. . . . The pain of it was making his eyes stream . . .

“LIAR!” she shrieked, but he could hear the terror behind the anger now. “YOU’VE GOT IT, POTTER, AND YOU WILL GIVE IT TO ME — *Accio Prophecy! ACCIO PROPHECY!*”

Harry laughed again because he knew it would incense her, the pain building in his head so badly he thought his skull might burst. He waved his empty hand from behind the one-eared goblin and withdrew it quickly as she sent another jet of green light flying at him.

“Nothing there!” he shouted. “Nothing to summon! It smashed and nobody heard what it said, tell your boss that —”

“No!” she screamed. “It isn’t true, you’re lying — MASTER, I TRIED, I TRIED — DO NOT PUNISH ME —”

“Don’t waste your breath!” yelled Harry, his eyes screwed up against the pain in his scar, now more terrible than ever. “He can’t hear you from here!”

“Can’t I, Potter?” said a high, cold voice.

Harry opened his eyes.

Tall, thin, and black-hooded, his terrible snakelike face white and gaunt, his scarlet, slit-pupiled eyes staring . . . Lord Voldemort had appeared in the middle of the hall, his wand pointing at Harry who stood frozen, quite unable to move.

“So you smashed my prophecy?” said Voldemort softly, staring at Harry with those pitiless red eyes. “No, Bella, he is not lying. . . . I see the truth looking at me from within his worthless mind. . . . Months of preparation, months of effort . . . and my Death Eaters have let Harry Potter thwart me again . . .”

“Master, I am sorry, I knew not, I was fighting the Animagus

Black!” sobbed Bellatrix, flinging herself down at Voldemort’s feet as he paced slowly nearer. “Master, you should know —”

“Be quiet, Bella,” said Voldemort dangerously. “I shall deal with you in a moment. Do you think I have entered the Ministry of Magic to hear your sniveling apologies?”

“But Master — he is here — he is below —”

Voldemort paid no attention.

“I have nothing more to say to you, Potter,” he said quietly. “You have irked me too often, for too long. *AVADA KEDAVRA!*”

Harry had not even opened his mouth to resist. His mind was blank, his wand pointing uselessly at the floor.

But the headless golden statue of the wizard in the fountain had sprung alive, leaping from its plinth, and landed on the floor with a crash between Harry and Voldemort. The spell merely glanced off its chest as the statue flung out its arms, protecting Harry.

“What — ?” said Voldemort, staring around. And then he breathed, “Dumbledore!”

Harry looked behind him, his heart pounding. Dumbledore was standing in front of the golden gates.

Voldemort raised his wand and sent another jet of green light at Dumbledore, who turned and was gone in a whirling of his cloak; next second he had reappeared behind Voldemort and waved his wand toward the remnants of the fountain; the other statues sprang to life too. The statue of the witch ran at Bellatrix, who screamed and sent spells streaming uselessly off its chest, before it dived at her, pinning her to the floor. Meanwhile, the goblin and the house-elf scuttled toward the fireplaces set along the wall, and the one-armed

centaur galloped at Voldemort, who vanished and reappeared beside the pool. The headless statue thrust Harry backward, away from the fight, as Dumbledore advanced on Voldemort and the golden centaur cantered around them both.

"It was foolish to come here tonight, Tom," said Dumbledore calmly. "The Aurors are on their way —"

"By which time I shall be gone, and you dead!" spat Voldemort. He sent another Killing Curse at Dumbledore but missed, instead hitting the security guard's desk, which burst into flame.

Dumbledore flicked his own wand. The force of the spell that emanated from it was such that Harry, though shielded by his stone guard, felt his hair stand on end as it passed, and this time Voldemort was forced to conjure a shining silver shield out of thin air to deflect it. The spell, whatever it was, caused no visible damage to the shield, though a deep, gonglike note reverberated from it, an oddly chilling sound. . . .

"You do not seek to kill me, Dumbledore?" called Voldemort, his scarlet eyes narrowed over the top of the shield. "Above such brutality, are you?"

"We both know that there are other ways of destroying a man, Tom," Dumbledore said calmly, continuing to walk toward Voldemort as though he had not a fear in the world, as though nothing had happened to interrupt his stroll up the hall. "Merely taking your life would not satisfy me, I admit —"

"There is nothing worse than death, Dumbledore!" snarled Voldemort.

"You are quite wrong," said Dumbledore, still closing in upon

Voldemort and speaking as lightly as though they were discussing the matter over drinks. Harry felt scared to see him walking along, undefended, shieldless. He wanted to cry out a warning, but his headless guard kept shunting him backward toward the wall, blocking his every attempt to get out from behind it. "Indeed, your failure to understand that there are things much worse than death has always been your greatest weakness —"

Another jet of green light flew from behind the silver shield. This time it was the one-armed centaur, galloping in front of Dumbledore, that took the blast and shattered into a hundred pieces, but before the fragments had even hit the floor, Dumbledore had drawn back his wand and waved it as though brandishing a whip. A long thin flame flew from the tip; it wrapped itself around Voldemort, shield and all. For a moment, it seemed Dumbledore had won, but then the fiery rope became a serpent, which relinquished its hold upon Voldemort at once and turned, hissing furiously, to face Dumbledore.

Voldemort vanished. The snake reared from the floor, ready to strike —

There was a burst of flame in midair above Dumbledore just as Voldemort reappeared, standing on the plinth in the middle of the pool where so recently the five statues had stood.

"Look out!" Harry yelled.

But even as he shouted, one more jet of green light had flown at Dumbledore from Voldemort's wand and the snake had struck —

Fawkes swooped down in front of Dumbledore, opened his beak wide, and swallowed the jet of green light whole. He burst into flame and fell to the floor, small, wrinkled, and flightless. At the same

moment, Dumbledore brandished his wand in one, long, fluid movement — the snake, which had been an instant from sinking its fangs into him, flew high into the air and vanished in a wisp of dark smoke; the water in the pool rose up and covered Voldemort like a cocoon of molten glass —

For a few seconds Voldemort was visible only as a dark, rippling, faceless figure, shimmering and indistinct upon the plinth, clearly struggling to throw off the suffocating mass —

Then he was gone, and the water fell with a crash back into its pool, slopping wildly over the sides, drenching the polished floor.

“MASTER!” screamed Bellatrix.

Sure it was over, sure Voldemort had decided to flee, Harry made to run out from behind his statue guard, but Dumbledore bellowed, “Stay where you are, Harry!”

For the first time, Dumbledore sounded frightened. Harry could not see why. The hall was quite empty but for themselves, the sobbing Bellatrix still trapped under her statue, and the tiny baby Fawkes croaking feebly on the floor —

And then Harry’s scar burst open. He knew he was dead: it was pain beyond imagining, pain past endurance —

He was gone from the hall, he was locked in the coils of a creature with red eyes, so tightly bound that Harry did not know where his body ended and the creature’s began. They were fused together, bound by pain, and there was no escape —

And when the creature spoke, it used Harry’s mouth, so that in his agony he felt his jaw move. . . .

“Kill me now, Dumbledore . . .”

Blinded and dying, every part of him screaming for release, Harry felt the creature use him again. . . .

“If death is nothing, Dumbledore, kill the boy. . . .”

Let the pain stop, thought Harry. Let him kill us. . . . End it, Dumbledore. . . . Death is nothing compared to this. . . .

And I’ll see Sirius again. . . .

And as Harry’s heart filled with emotion, the creature’s coils loosened, the pain was gone, Harry was lying facedown on the floor, his glasses gone, shivering as though he lay upon ice, not wood. . . .

And there were voices echoing through the hall, more voices than there should have been: Harry opened his eyes, saw his glasses lying at the heel of the headless statue that had been guarding him, but which now lay flat on its back, cracked and immobile. He put them on and raised his head an inch to find Dumbledore’s crooked nose inches from his own.

“Are you all right, Harry?”

“Yes,” said Harry, shaking so violently he could not hold his head up properly. “Yeah, I’m — where’s Voldemort, where — who are all these — what’s —”

The Atrium was full of people. The floor was reflecting emerald-green flames that had burst into life in all the fireplaces along one wall, and a stream of witches and wizards was emerging from them. As Dumbledore pulled him back to his feet, Harry saw the tiny gold statues of the house-elf and the goblin leading a stunned-looking Cornelius Fudge forward.

“He was there!” shouted a scarlet-robed man with a ponytail, who was pointing at a pile of golden rubble on the other side of the hall,

where Bellatrix had lain trapped moments before. "I saw him, Mr. Fudge, I swear, it was You-Know-Who, he grabbed a woman and Disapparated!"

"I know, Williamson, I know, I saw him too!" gibbered Fudge, who was wearing pajamas under his pinstriped cloak and was gasping as though he had just run miles. "Merlin's beard — here — *here!* — in the Ministry of Magic! — great heavens above — it doesn't seem possible — my word — how can this be?"

"If you proceed downstairs into the Department of Mysteries, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, apparently satisfied that Harry was all right, and walking forward so that the newcomers realized he was there for the first time (a few of them raised their wands, others simply looked amazed; the statues of the elf and goblin applauded and Fudge jumped so much that his slipper-clad feet left the floor), "you will find several escaped Death Eaters contained in the Death Chamber, bound by an Anti-Disapparation Jinx and awaiting your decision as to what to do with them."

"Dumbledore!" gasped Fudge, apparently beside himself with amazement. "You — here — I — I —"

He looked wildly around at the Aurors he had brought with him, and it could not have been clearer that he was in half a mind to cry, "Seize him!"

"Cornelius, I am ready to fight your men — and win again!" said Dumbledore in a thunderous voice. "But a few minutes ago you saw proof, with your own eyes, that I have been telling you the truth for a year. Lord Voldemort has returned, you have been chasing the wrong men for twelve months, and it is time you listened to sense!"

“I — don’t — well —” blustered Fudge, looking around as though hoping somebody was going to tell him what to do. When nobody did, he said, “Very well — Dawlish! Williamson! Go down to the Department of Mysteries and see . . . Dumbledore, you — you will need to tell me exactly — the Fountain of Magical Brethren — what happened?” he added in a kind of whimper, staring around at the floor, where the remains of the statues of the witch, wizard, and centaur now lay scattered.

“We can discuss that after I have sent Harry back to Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore.

“Harry — *Harry Potter*?”

Fudge spun around and stared at Harry, who was still standing against the wall beside the fallen statue that had been guarding him during Dumbledore and Voldemort’s duel.

“He-here?” said Fudge. “Why — what’s all this about?”

“I shall explain everything,” repeated Dumbledore, “when Harry is back at school.”

He walked away from the pool to the place where the golden wizard’s head lay on the floor. He pointed his wand at it and muttered, “*Portus*.” The head glowed blue and trembled noisily against the wooden floor for a few seconds, then became still once more.

“Now see here, Dumbledore!” said Fudge, as Dumbledore picked up the head and walked back to Harry carrying it. “You haven’t got authorization for that Portkey! You can’t do things like that right in front of the Minister of Magic, you — you —”

His voice faltered as Dumbledore surveyed him magisterially over

his half-moon spectacles.

“You will give the order to remove Dolores Umbridge from Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore. “You will tell your Aurors to stop searching for my Care of Magical Creatures teacher so that he can return to work. I will give you . . .” Dumbledore pulled a watch with twelve hands from his pocket and glanced at it, “half an hour of my time tonight, in which I think we shall be more than able to cover the important points of what has happened here. After that, I shall need to return to my school. If you need more help from me you are, of course, more than welcome to contact me at Hogwarts. Letters addressed to the headmaster will find me.”

Fudge goggled worse than ever. His mouth was open and his round face grew pinker under his rumpled gray hair.

“I — you —”

Dumbledore turned his back on him.

“Take this Portkey, Harry.”

He held out the golden head of the statue, and Harry placed his hand upon it, past caring what he did next or where he went.

“I shall see you in half an hour,” said Dumbledore quietly. “One . . . two . . . three . . .”

Harry felt the familiar sensation of a hook being jerked behind his navel. The polished wooden floor was gone from beneath his feet; the Atrium, Fudge, and Dumbledore had all disappeared, and he was flying forward in a whirlwind of color and sound. . . .

Die enigste een wat hy vrees

"Hy is nie weg nie!" gil Harry.

Hy kan dit nie glo nie. Hy wil dit nie glo nie. Hy verset hom met elke greintjie krag teen Lupin. Lupin verstaan nie, daar is mense agter daardie gordyn. Harry het hulle hoor fluister toe hy die eerste keer in die kamer gekom het. Sirius kruip daar weg, hy's daar, net buite sig –

"SIRIUS!" skree hy. "SIRIUS!"

"Hy kan nie terugkom nie, Harry." Lupin se stem breek. "Hy kan nie terugkom nie, want hy's d–"

"HY – IS – NIE!" skreeu Harry. "SIRIUS!"

Mense beweeg om hulle, 'n sinlose gemaal en flitsende tower-spreuke. Vir Harry is dit bloot betekenislose geraas. Die paljasse wat verby hom vlieg, kan hom nie skeel nie. Niks maak meer saak nie, behalwe dat Lupin moet verstaan dat Sirius, wat net 'n paar tree van hulle af agter daardie ou gordyn staan, binnekort gaan terugkom, sy donker hare uit sy oë gaan skud en gretig voortveg.

Lupin sleep hom verder weg van die platform terwyl Harry na die poort bly staar, kwaad vir Sirius wat hom so lank laat wag –

Maar diep binne weet hy, selfs terwyl hy hom uit Lupin se greep probeer losskeur, dat Sirius hom nog nooit voorheen laat wag het nie. Sirius het nog altyd alles gewaag om vir Harry te sien, om hom te help. As Sirius nie deur daardie poort kom wanneer Harry hom roep asof sy lewe daarvan afhang nie, is die enigste verklaring dat hy nie kan nie. . . dat hy regtig –

Dompeldorius het die meeste van die oorblywende Doodseters in die middel van die vertrek met onsigbare toue vasgebind. Maloog Moodie het oor die vloer na Tonks gekruip en probeer om haar by te bring. Agter die platform weerklink steeds ligflitse, kreune en krete. Dis Kingsley wat Sirius se tweegeveg met Bellatrix voortsit.

"Haddy?"

Neville seil klipbank vir klipbank af tot by Harry. Harry worstel

nie meer met Lupin nie, maar Lupin hou sy arms nog steeds veiligheidsshalwe vas.

"Haddy . . . ek's baie jamme' . . ." sê Neville. Sy bene dans nog steeds onbeheerbaar. "Was daai man – was Siwius Swawdt – 'n – 'n wviend?"

Harry knik.

"Wag." Lupin rig sy towerstaf op Neville se bene. "Finite." Die paljas lig en Neville se bene word stil. Lupin se gesig is bleek. "Kom – kom ons gaan soek die ander. Waar is hulle, Neville?"

"Hulle's daa' agte'," sê Neville. "'n Bwein het vi' Ron aangeval, maa' ek dink hy's oukei – en He'mien's flou, maa' daa' is 'n pols."

Hulle hoor 'n harde slag en 'n kreet agter die platform. Harry sien hoe Kingsley die grond tref, krullend van pyn. Bellatrix Lestrange vlieg om en laat spaander net toe Dompeldorius ook omswaai. Hy stuur 'n spreuk na haar, maar sy weer dit af. Sy is amper bo by die deur –

"Harry – nee!" skree Lupin toe Harry uit sy greep losruk.

"SYT VIR SIRIUS VERMOOR!" brul Harry. "SYT HOM VERMOOR – EK GAAN HAAR VREK MAAK!"

Hy storm met die kliptrappe op. Agter hom skree mense, maar hy steur hom nie daaraan nie. Die soom van Bellatrix se kleed verdwyn warrelend om die deur. Hulle is terug in die kamer met die swemmende breine.

Sy stuur 'n vloek oor haar skouer na hom. Die tenk styg op en kantel om. 'n Stink vloeistof stroom oor Harry, die breine gly oor hom en steek hul lang tentakels na hom toe uit, maar hy skree "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" en hulle vlieg op in die lug. Hy hardloop glippend en glyend na die deur, spring oor Mania wat op die vloer lê en kreun, storm verby Ginny wat sê "Harry – wat –?" verby Ron, wat nog steeds simpelrig giggel, en Hermien, wat nog steeds bewusteloos is. Hy trek die deur voor die ronde swart kamer oop en sien hoe Bellatrix deur 'n deur aan die oorkant van die vertrek verdwyn. Die gang wat na die hysers lei, lê voor haar.

Harry versnel, maar sy slaan die deur agter haar toe en die mure begin onmiddellik draai. Hy is weer eens omring deur strepe blou lig in die tollende blakers.

"Waar's die uitgang?" skree hy wanhopig toe die muur rammelend tot stilstand kom. "Hoe kom ek hier uit?"

Dis of die kamer gewag het dat hy moet vra. Die deur reg agter hom vlieg oop en voor hom lê die gang na die hysbakke, verlig deur fakkels en heeltemal verlate. Hy laat spaander . . .

Hy hoor 'n hysbak se geklater voor hom en nael in die gang op

en om die hoek. Hy slaan die knoppie met sy vuus om 'n hysbak te ontbied. Dit kom klaterend af, die traliehekke gly oop en Harry storm in. Hy hamer op die knoppie waarop "Atrium" staan. Die deure skuif toe en hy begin styg.

Hy bars uit die hysbak nog voor die traliehekke behoorlik oop is en kyk vinnig rond. Bellatrix is amper by die telefoonhysbak aan die oorkant van die portaal, maar sy kyk om toe hy aangehardloop kom en stuur 'n towerspreuk op hom af. Hy koes agter die Fontein van die Magiese Gebroeders weg. Die spreuk zoem verby hom en tref die goue hekke aan die oorkant van die Atrium, wat soos klokke beier. Hy hoor nie verdere voetvalle nie. Sy het gaan staan. Hy hurk agter die standbeelde en luister.

"Kom uit, Harrytjie!" roep sy in haar spottende babastem sodat die woorde oor die gepoleerde houtvloere weerklink. "Hoekom soek jy my dan? Ek dag dis om my liewe neef te wreek?"

"Dit is!" skree Harry en dis of 'n skare spookstemme oral in die vertrek antwoord: "Dit is! Dit is! Dit is!"

"Aaaaa . . . dan was jy lief vir hom, klein baba-Pottie?"

Harry voel hoe 'n vurige haat in hom opwel soos hy nog nooit tevore ervaar het nie. Hy duik agter die fontein uit en skreeu: "*Crucio!*"

Bellatrix skree. Die vloek het haar onderstebo geslaan, maar sy kerm en krul nie van pyn soos Neville nie – sy staan al weer regop, hoewel sy uitasem is en nie meer lag nie. Harry koes weer agter die goue fontein. Haar teenvloek tref die aantreklike towenaar se kop en blaas dit weg sodat dit vyf meter verder grondvat en lang vore in die houtvloer maak.

"Jy't nog nie tevore 'n Onvergeeslike Vloek gebruik nie, hè, boet?" gil sy, nou nie meer in 'n babastemmetjie nie. "Jy moet dit *bedoel*, Potter! Jy moet my regtig wil seermaak, jy moet dit *geniet* – jou geregverdigde woede sal my nie lank seermaak nie. Sal ek jou wys hoe om dit te doen, jou 'n les gee –"

Harry is besig om om die fontein te beweeg toe sy onverwags skree: "*Crucio!*" Hy koes weer en die sentour se arm en sy boog spat weg en val met 'n slag op die vloer, nie ver van die goue towenaar se kop nie.

"Potter, jy staan nie 'n kans teen my nie!" skree Bellatrix.

Hy hoor hoe sy na regs om die fontein beweeg om hom onder skoot te kry. Hy beweeg gebukkend om die standbeelde na die ander kant en hurk agter die sentour se bene, sy kop gelyk met die huiself s'n.

"Ek was en is die Donker Heer se lojaalste volgeling. Ek het die Donker Kunste by hom geleer en ek ken spreuke wat só kragtig is dat 'n patetiese klein seuntjie soos jy nooit kan droom om teen my te veg –"

"Bedwelml!" skree Harry. Hy het om die fontein geglip na waar die gnoom steeds stralend na die koplose goue towenaar staan en die paljas op haar rug afgestuur. Sy reageer so vinnig dat hy amper nie betyds koes nie.

"Protego!"

'n Rooi ligstraal, sy eie Bedwelmpaljas, bons terug na hom. Harry duik weg agter die fontein en een van die gnoom se ore vlieg deur die vertrek.

"Potter, ek gee jou een kans! Gee die profesie vir my – rol dit hierheen – dan spaar ek dalk jou lewe!"

"Wel, jy sal my moet doodmaak, want dis weg!" gil Harry en toe hy hierdie woorde uiter, skiet 'n steekpyn deur sy voorkop. Sy litteken brand opnuut en hy ervaar 'n golf van woede wat niks met sy eie woede te doen het nie. "En hy weet dit!" Harry uiter 'n waansinnige laggie wat baie soos Bellatrix s'n klink. "Jou liewe vriend Woldemort weet dis weg! Hy gaan nie hiervan hou nie, nè?"

"Wat? Wat bedoel jy?" skree sy en vir die eerste keer is daar vrees in haar stem.

"Die profesie het gebreek toe ek vir Neville by die trappe opgehelp het! Wat dink jy gaan Woldemort daarvan sê?"

Sy litteken brand . . . die pyn laat sy oë traan.

"LEUENAARI!" skree sy, maar hy hoor die angs agter die woede. "JY HET DIT, POTTER, EN JY SAL DIT VIR MY GEE! *Accio profesie! ACCIO PROFESIE!*"

Harry lag weer omdat hy weet dit sal haar briesend maak. Die pyn in sy kop is nou so erg dat dit voel of sy skedel gaan oopbars. Hy waai sy leë hand van agter die eenoor-gnoom vir haar en trek dit vinnig terug toe sy nog 'n groen straal na hom stuur.

"Ek het niks nie!" skree hy. "Daar is niks wat jy kan ontbied nie! Dis stukkend en niemand het die profesie gehoor nie, gaan vertel dit vir jou baas!"

"Nee," skreeu sy. "Dis nie waar nie, jy lieg! MEESTER, EK HET PROBEER, EK HET PROBEER – MOET MY NIE STRAF NIE –"

"Moenie jou asem mors nie!" gil Harry, sy oë skrefies getrek teen die pyn in sy litteken, wat nou nog erger as tevore is. "Hy kan jou nie van hier af hoor nie!"

"Kan ek nie, Potter?" sê 'n hoë, koue stem.

Harry maak sy oë oop.

Lank, maar en met 'n swart kap op, sy aaklige slanggesig bleek en uitgeteer, sy katagtige skarlaken pupille starend . . . staan die Heer Woldemort in die middel van die saal, sy towerstaf op Harry gerig. Harry vries, nie in staat om te roer nie.

"Dan het jy my profesie vernietig?" sê Woldemort sag en staar na Harry met sy genadelose rooi oë. "Nee, Bella, hy lieg nie . . . ek sien die waarheid in sy nuttelose brein . . . Maande se voorbereiding, maande se inspanning . . . en my Doodseters laat toe dat Harry Potter my nogmaals dwarsboom . . ."

"Meester, vergewe my, ek het nie geweet nie, ek het teen die animagus Swardt geveg!" snik Bellatrix en slinger haar voor Woldemort se voete toe hy stadig nader kom. "Meester, u moet weet –"

"Stil, Bella," sê Woldemort koud. "Ek sal later met jou afreken. Dink jy ek het na die Ministerie vir Towerkuns gekom om na jou snottierende verskonings te luister?"

"Maar Meester – hy is hier – hier onder –"

Woldemort ignoreer haar.

"Ek het niks meer om vir jou te sê nie, Potter," sê hy sag. "Jy irriteer my alte dikwels en vir te lank. AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry kan nie eens sy mond oopmaak om homself te verdedig nie, sy verstand staan stil, sy towerstaf hang nutteloos langs hom.

Maar die koplose goue standbeeld van die towenaar spring van sy voetstuk af en land met 'n slag op die vloer tussen Harry en Woldemort. Die vloek bons weg van die standbeeld se bolyf toe hy sy arms beskermend voor Harry uitsprei.

"Wat?" skree Woldemort en kyk rond. Dan sê hy uitasem: "Dompeldorius!"

Harry se hart ruk en hy kyk om. Dompeldorius staan voor die goue hekke.

Woldemort lig sy towerstaf en nog 'n groen ligstraal blits na Dompeldorius, wat omswaai en met 'n warrelende mantel verdwyn. Die volgende oomblik staan hy agter Woldemort en waai sy towerstaf na die oorblyfsels van die fontein. Die ander standbeelde word eensklaps lewend. Die standbeeld van die heks nael na Bellatrix, wat skreeu en 'n string vloeke na haar stuur. Dit loop soos water van die heks af. Sy duik Bellatrix plat en pen haar teen die grond vas. Die gnoom en die huiself skarrel na die kaggelrakke teen die muur en die afarm-sentour galop na Woldemort, wat verdwyn en weer langs die poel verskyn. Intussen stoot die koplose standbeeld Harry agtertoe, weg van die geveg, terwyl Dompeldorius afgemete na Woldemort stap en die goue sentour om hulle galop.

"Dit was dwaas om vanaand hierheen te kom, Erik," sê Dompeldorius bedaard. "Die Aurors is op pad –"

"Teen daardie tyd sal ek weg wees en jy dood!" spoeg Woldemort. Hy stuur nog 'n doodsvloek na Dompeldorius, maar dis mis. Dit tref die sekerheidswag se toonbank, wat in vlamme uitbars.

Dompeldorius maak 'n rapsbeweging met sy towerstaf. Die geweld van sy paljas laat Harry se hare penorent staan toe dit verby hom en sy goue beskermers flits. Hierdie keer moet Woldemort 'n skitterende silwer skild optower om dit af te weer. Die paljas doen geen sigbare skade aan die skild nie, behalwe 'n vreemde diep ghong-geluid.

"Jy wil my dus nie doodmaak nie, Dompeldorius?" Woldemort se rooi oë gluur oor die rand van die skild. "Sulke brutaliteit is benede jou?"

"Ons weet albei daar is ander maniere om 'n man te vernietig, Erik," sê Dompeldorius rustig terwyl hy nog steeds doelgerig na Woldemort stap asof daar nie 'n bang haar op sy kop is nie, asof niks gebeur het wat sy wandeling in die portaal kan versteur nie. "Ek is bevrees, om bloot jou lewe te neem, sal my nie tevrede stel nie –"

"Daar is niks erger as die dood nie, Dompeldorius!" snou Woldemort.

"Jy is heeltemal verkeerd," sê Dompeldorius vriendelik, asof hy en Woldemort die saak iewers rustig oor 'n drankie sit en bespreek. Harry kan dit nie verduur om hom so te sien stap nie, sonder enige verdediging, sonder 'n skild. Hy wil 'n waarskuwing uitskree, maar sy koplose wag stuur hom meedoënloos na die muur en fnuik al sy pogings om te ontsnap. "Inderdaad, jou onvermoë om te verstaan dat daar dinge is wat erger as die dood is, was nog altyd jou grootste swaakteit."

Nog 'n groen ligstraal skiet agter die silwer skild uit. Hierdie keer ontgeld die alarm-sentour dit toe hy voor Dompeldorius verbygalop en aan honderde stukke spat. Maar Dompeldorius se towerstaf is gereed selfs nog voor die stukke grondvat. Dit klap soos 'n sweep en 'n lang dun vlam skiet uit die punt en tol om Woldemort, skild en al. Vir 'n oomblik lyk dit of Dompeldorius gewen het, maar die vurige tou word 'n slang, wat sy greep op Woldemort onmiddellik verslap en hom sissend van woede na Dompeldorius keer.

Woldemort verdwyn en die slang lig sy bolyf, gereed om te pik – Daar is 'n vurige gloed in die lug bo Dompeldorius, net toe Woldemort op die voetstuk in die middel van die fontein verskyn waar kort gelede nog vyf standbeelde gestaan het.

"Oppas!" skree Harry.

Nog 'n groen ligstraal pyl op Dompeldorius af en terselfdertyd slaan die slang toe.

Maar Fawkes swiep met 'n oopgesperde snawel uit die lug en sluk die groen ligstraal heel in. Hy bars in vlamme uit en val op die grond, klein, verrimpel en sonder vere. Terselfdertyd maak Dom-

peldorius 'n lang gladde beweging met sy towerstaf en die slang, wat op die punt was om sy slagande in hom te slaan, skiet in die lug op en warrel weg in 'n yl, donker rokie. Die water in die fontein styg op en vou Woldemort toe soos 'n kokon van gesmelte glas.

Vir 'n paar oomblikke is Woldemort net 'n donker, rimpelende, gesiglose figuur wat teen die versmorende watermassa veg. Dan is hy weg en die water val met 'n slag terug in die poel, sodat dit wild oor die kante spoel en die glansende vloer deurdrenk.

"MEESTER!" skree Bellatrix.

Harry is seker dis verby: Woldemort het besluit om te vlug. Hy wil agter die goue standbeeld uitstorm, maar Dompeldorius skree: "Bly waar jy is, Harry!"

En vir die eerste keer klink Dompeldorius bang. Harry kan nie verstaan hoekom nie: die portaal is heeltemal leeg afgesien van hulle twee, die snikkende Bellatrix wat nog steeds onder die heks se standbeeld vasgepen is en die babafeniks Fawkes wat op die vloer sit en floutjies kry.

Dan bars Harry se litteken oop en hy weet hy is dood. Dis pyn soos hy hom nooit sou kon voorstel nie, ondraaglike pyn –

Hy is nie meer in die portaal nie, hy is gevang in die kronkels van 'n wese met skarlaken oë, so styf vasgebind dat hy nie weet waar sy eie liggaam eindig en die dier s'n begin nie: hulle is verstrengel, verenig deur pyn, hy kan op geen manier wegkom nie –

En toe die dier praat, gebruik hy Harry se mond. Harry voel deur sy pyn hoe sy kake beweeg . . .

"Maak my nou dood, Dompeldorius . . ."

Verblind, sterwend, met elke deel van sy liggaam smagtend na verligting, voel Harry hoe die dier hom nogmaals gebruik . . .

"As die dood dan niks is nie, Dompeldorius, maak die seun dood . . ."

Laat die pyn net ophou, dink Harry . . . laat hy ons doodmaak . . . maak 'n einde hieraan, Dompeldorius . . . die dood is niks in vergelyking hiermee nie . . .

En ek sal weer vir Sirius sien . . .

Emosie oorspoel Harry se gemoed, en plotseling verslap die dier se kronkels en die pyn bedaar. Harry lê plat op sy gesig op die vloer, sonder bril, bewend, asof hy op ys en nie op hout lê nie . . .

Stemme eggo deur die portaal, meer stemme as wat daar moet wees . . . Harry maak sy oë oop en sien sy bril langs die koplose standbeeld wat hom opgepas het, maar wat nou plat op sy rug lê, gekraak en roerloos. Hy sit sy bril op en lig sy kop effens. Dompeldorius se krom neus hang bo sy gesig.

"Is alles reg, Harry?"

"Ja," sê Harry, wat so erg bewe dat hy sy kop skaars regop kan hou. "Ja, ek's – waar's Woldemort, waar – wie's al die – wat –"

Die Atrium is vol mense. Die vloer weerkaats die smaraggroen vlamme wat onder al die kaggelrakke teen een muur ontvlam het en 'n stroom hekse en towenaars klim daaruit. Dompeldorius help Harry orent en hy sien hoe die goue standbeelde van die huiself en die gnoom 'n baie verwilderde Cornelius Broddelwerk na hulle lei.

"Hy was daar!" skree 'n man met 'n poniestert in 'n rooi kleed en wys na die hoop goue rommel aan die oorkant van die portaal waar Bellatrix oomblikke gelede nog gelê het. "Ek het hom gesien, meneer Broddelwerk, ek sweer dit was Jy-Weet-Wie. Hy't 'n vrou gegryp en gedisappareer!"

"Ek weet, Williamson, ek weet, ek het hom ook gesien!" brabbel Broddelwerk, wat pajamas onder sy strepiesmantel aanhet en blaas asof hy 'n marathon gehardloop het. "Merlin se baard – hier – hier! – in die Ministerie vir Towerkuns! – grote genugtig – dis onmoontlik – gedorie – hoe het dit gebeur –?"

"Gaan kyk in die Departement vir Geheime, Cornelius," sê Dompeldorius, wat skynbaar tevrede is dat Harry ongedeerd is en nou nader stap sodat die nuwe aankomelinge meteens van sy teenwoordigheid bewus word. 'n Paar lig hui towerstawe, van die ander lyk verbaas, die standbeelde van die elf en die gnoom klap hande en Broddelwerk wip so hoog dat sy pantoffels die vloer verlaat. "Jy sal heelparty ontsnapte Doodseters in die Doodskamer vind, gebind met 'n Teenappareringspalfas. Jy moet instruksies gee oor wat verder met hulle moet gebeur."

"Dompeldorius!" snak Broddelwerk, heeltemal verstom. "Jy – hier – ek – ek –"

Hy kyk wild na die Aurors wat saam met hom gekom het en dis duidelik op die punt van sy tong om "Gryp hom!" te skree.

"Cornelius, ek is gereed om teen jou manne te veg – en te wen – weer!" sê Dompeldorius in 'n dawerende stem. "Maar 'n paar oomblikke gelede het jy met jou eie oë gesien dat ek die afgelope jaar die waarheid gepraat het. Die heer Woldemort is terug, vir twaalf maande het jy na die verkeerde man gesoek. Dis tyd om na rede te luister!"

"Ek – het nie – wel –" tier Broddelwerk en kyk rond asof hy hoop dat iemand vir hom gaan sê wat om te doen. Toe almal stilbly, sê hy: "Goed dan – Davel! Williamson! Gaan na die Departement vir Geheime en kyk wat daar aangaan . . . Dompeldorius, jy – jy moet my presies vertel – die Fontein van Magiese Gebroeders – wat het hier gebeur?" sê hy in 'n bewende stem en staar na die vloer waaroor die reste van die standbeelde van die heks, die toenaar en die sentour gesaai lê.

"Ons kan later daaroor praat, nadat ek vir Harry terug Hogwarts toe gestuur het," sê Dompeldorius.

"Harry – Harry Potter?"

Broddelwerk vlieg om en staar na Harry, wat nog steeds teen die muur langs die gevalle standbeeld staan wat hom tydens Dompeldorius en Woldemort se tweegeveg beskerm het.

"Hy – hier?" Broddelwerk gaap vir Harry aan. "Hoekom – wat gaan aan?"

"Ek sal later verduidelik," herhaal Dompeldorius, "wanneer Harry weer by die skool is."

Hy stap na die plek waar die goue towenaar se kop op die vloer lê, rig sy towerstaf daarop en prewel: "*Portus*." Die kop gloei blou en rittel 'n rukkie raserig teen die houtvloer voor dit weer stil word.

"Nee, kyk, Dompeldorius!" sê Broddelwerk toe Dompeldorius die kop optel en na Harry stap. "Jy't nie magtiging vir daardie Poortsleutel nie! Jy kan nie sulke dinge hier voor die Minister vir Towerkuns doen nie, jy – jy –"

Sy stem raak weg toe Dompeldorius oor sy halfmaanbril na hom staar.

"Jy sal opdrag gee dat Dolores Umbridge uit Hogwarts verwyder word," sê Dompeldorius. "Jy sal jou Aurors aansê om hul soektog na my onderwyser vir die Versorging van Magiese Kreature te staak sodat hy kan kom werk. Ek sal jou vanaand . . ." Dompeldorius haal 'n horlosie uit sy sak en bestudeer die twaalf hande daarop, ". . . 'n halfuur van my tyd gee, ek dink dis oorgenoeg om te bespreek wat hier gebeur het. Daarna moet ek teruggaan na my skool. As jy verdere hulp benodig, staan dit jou natuurlik vry om my by Hogwarts te kontak. Alle briewe geadresseer aan die skoolhoof sal by my uitkom."

Broddelwerk se oë peul nog verder uit, sy mond hang oop en sy ronde gesig is pienk onder sy ongekamde grys hare.

"Ek – jy –"

Dompeldorius draai sy rug op hom.

"Neem hierdie Poortsleutel, Harry."

Hy hou die standbeeld se kop uit en Harry, wat skaars weet of hy kom of gaan, sit sy hand daarop.

"Ek sien jou oor 'n halfuur," sê Dompeldorius sag. "Een . . . twee . . . drie . . ."

Harry voel die bekende sensasie van 'n haak agter sy naeltjie. Die glansende houtvloer verdwyn onder sy voete, die Atrium, Broddelwerk en Dompeldorius raak weg, en hy vlieg deur 'n warrelwind van kleur en klank . . .

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



THE LOST PROPHECY

Harry's feet hit solid ground again; his knees buckled a little and the golden wizard's head fell with a resounding *clunk* to the floor. He looked around and saw that he had arrived in Dumbledore's office.

Everything seemed to have repaired itself during the headmaster's absence. The delicate silver instruments stood again upon the spindle-legged tables, puffing and whirring serenely. The portraits of the headmasters and headmistresses were snoozing in their frames, heads lolling back in armchairs or against the edge of their pictures. Harry looked through the window. There was a cool line of pale green along the horizon: Dawn was approaching.

The silence and the stillness, broken only by the occasional grunt or snuffle of a sleeping portrait, was unbearable to him. If his surroundings could have reflected the feelings inside him, the pictures would have been screaming in pain. He walked around the quiet, beautiful office, breathing quickly, trying not to think. But he had to think. . . . There was no escape. . . .

It was his fault Sirius had died; it was all his fault. If he, Harry, had not been stupid enough to fall for Voldemort's trick, if he had not been so convinced that what he had seen in his dream was real, if he had only opened his mind to the possibility that Voldemort was, as Hermione had said, banking on Harry's *love of playing the hero* . . .

It was unbearable, he would not think about it, he could not stand it. . . . There was a terrible hollow inside him he did not want to feel or examine, a dark hole where Sirius had been, where Sirius had vanished. He did not want to have to be alone with that great, silent space, he could not stand it —

A picture behind him gave a particularly loud grunting snore, and a cool voice said, "Ah . . . Harry Potter . . ."

Phineas Nigellus gave a long yawn, stretching his arms as he watched Harry with shrewd, narrow eyes.

"And what brings you here in the early hours of the morning?" said Phineas. "This office is supposed to be barred to all but the rightful headmaster. Or has Dumbledore sent you here? Oh, don't tell me . . ." He gave another shuddering yawn. "Another message for my worthless great-great-grandson?"

Harry could not speak. Phineas Nigellus did not know that Sirius was dead, but Harry could not tell him. To say it aloud would be to

make it final, absolute, irretrievable.

A few more of the portraits had stirred now. Terror of being interrogated made Harry stride across the room and seize the doorknob.

It would not turn. He was shut in.

"I hope this means," said the corpulent, red-nosed wizard who hung on the wall behind Dumbledore's desk, "that Dumbledore will soon be back with us?"

Harry turned. The wizard was eyeing him with great interest. Harry nodded. He tugged again on the doorknob behind his back, but it remained immovable.

"Oh good," said the wizard. "It has been very dull without him, very dull indeed."

He settled himself on the thronelike chair on which he had been painted and smiled benignly upon Harry.

"Dumbledore thinks very highly of you, as I am sure you know," he said comfortably. "Oh yes. Holds you in great esteem."

The guilt filling the whole of Harry's chest like some monstrous, weighty parasite now writhed and squirmed. Harry could not stand this, he could not stand being Harry anymore. . . . He had never felt more trapped inside his own head and body, never wished so intensely that he could be somebody — anybody — else.

The empty fireplace burst into emerald-green flame, making Harry leap away from the door, staring at the man spinning inside the grate. As Dumbledore's tall form unfolded itself from the fire, the wizards and witches on the surrounding walls jerked awake. Many of them gave cries of welcome.

“Thank you,” said Dumbledore softly.

He did not look at Harry at first, but walked over to the perch beside the door and withdrew, from an inside pocket of his robes, the tiny, ugly, featherless Fawkes, whom he placed gently on the tray of soft ashes beneath the golden post where the full-grown Fawkes usually stood.

“Well, Harry,” said Dumbledore, finally turning away from the baby bird, “you will be pleased to hear that none of your fellow students are going to suffer lasting damage from the night’s events.”

Harry tried to say “Good,” but no sound came out. It seemed to him that Dumbledore was reminding him of the amount of damage he had caused by his actions tonight, and although Dumbledore was for once looking at him directly, and though his expression was kindly rather than accusatory, Harry could not bear to meet his eyes.

“Madam Pomfrey is patching everybody up now,” said Dumbledore. “Nymphadora Tonks may need to spend a little time in St. Mungo’s, but it seems that she will make a full recovery.”

Harry contented himself with nodding at the carpet, which was growing lighter as the sky outside grew paler. He was sure that all the portraits around the room were listening eagerly to every word Dumbledore spoke, wondering where Dumbledore and Harry had been and why there had been injuries.

“I know how you are feeling, Harry,” said Dumbledore very quietly.

“No, you don’t,” said Harry, and his voice was suddenly loud and strong. White-hot anger leapt inside him. Dumbledore knew *nothing* about his feelings.

“You see, Dumbledore?” said Phineas Nigellus slyly. “Never try to understand the students. They hate it. They would much rather be tragically misunderstood, wallow in self-pity, stew in their own —”

“That’s enough, Phineas,” said Dumbledore.

Harry turned his back on Dumbledore and stared determinedly out of the opposite window. He could see the Quidditch stadium in the distance. Sirius had appeared there once, disguised as the shaggy black dog, so he could watch Harry play. . . . He had probably come to see whether Harry was as good as James had been. . . . Harry had never asked him. . . .

“There is no shame in what you are feeling, Harry,” said Dumbledore’s voice. “On the contrary . . . the fact that you can feel pain like this is your greatest strength.”

Harry felt the white-hot anger lick his insides, blazing in the terrible emptiness, filling him with the desire to hurt Dumbledore for his calmness and his empty words.

“My greatest strength, is it?” said Harry, his voice shaking as he stared out at the Quidditch stadium, no longer seeing it. “You haven’t got a clue. . . . You don’t know . . .”

“What don’t I know?” asked Dumbledore calmly.

It was too much. Harry turned around, shaking with rage.

“I don’t want to talk about how I feel, all right?”

“Harry, suffering like this proves you are still a man! This pain is part of being human —”

“THEN — I — DON’T — WANT — TO — BE — HUMAN!” Harry roared, and he seized one of the delicate silver instruments from the spindle-legged table beside him and flung it across the

room. It shattered into a hundred tiny pieces against the wall. Several of the pictures let out yells of anger and fright, and the portrait of Armando Dippet said, "*Really!*"

"I DON'T CARE!" Harry yelled at them, snatching up a lunascope and throwing it into the fireplace. "I'VE HAD ENOUGH, I'VE SEEN ENOUGH, I WANT OUT, I WANT IT TO END, I DON'T CARE ANYMORE —"

He seized the table on which the silver instrument had stood and threw that too. It broke apart on the floor and the legs rolled in different directions.

"You do care," said Dumbledore. He had not flinched or made a single move to stop Harry demolishing his office. His expression was calm, almost detached. "You care so much you feel as though you will bleed to death with the pain of it."

"I — DON'T!" Harry screamed, so loudly that he felt his throat might tear, and for a second he wanted to rush at Dumbledore and break him too; shatter that calm old face, shake him, hurt him, make him feel some tiny part of the horror inside Harry.

"Oh yes, you do," said Dumbledore, still more calmly. "You have now lost your mother, your father, and the closest thing to a parent you have ever known. Of course you care."

"YOU DON'T KNOW HOW I FEEL!" Harry roared. "YOU — STANDING THERE — YOU —"

But words were no longer enough, smashing things was no more help. He wanted to run, he wanted to keep running and never look back, he wanted to be somewhere he could not see the clear blue eyes staring at him, that hatefully calm old face. He ran to the door,

seized the doorknob again, and wrenched at it.

But the door would not open.

Harry turned back to Dumbledore.

"Let me out," he said. He was shaking from head to foot.

"No," said Dumbledore simply.

For a few seconds they stared at each other.

"Let me out," Harry said again.

"No," Dumbledore repeated.

"If you don't — if you keep me in here — if you don't let me —"

"By all means continue destroying my possessions," said Dumbledore serenely. "I daresay I have too many."

He walked around his desk and sat down behind it, watching Harry.

"Let me out," Harry said yet again, in a voice that was cold and almost as calm as Dumbledore's.

"Not until I have had my say," said Dumbledore.

"Do you — do you think I want to — do you think I give a — I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU'VE GOT TO SAY!" Harry roared. "I don't want to hear *anything* you've got to say!"

"You will," said Dumbledore sadly. "Because you are not nearly as angry with me as you ought to be. If you are to attack me, as I know you are close to doing, I would like to have thoroughly earned it."

"What are you talking — ?"

"It is *my* fault that Sirius died," said Dumbledore clearly. "Or I should say almost entirely my fault — I will not be so arrogant as to

claim responsibility for the whole. Sirius was a brave, clever, and energetic man, and such men are not usually content to sit at home in hiding while they believe others to be in danger. Nevertheless, you should never have believed for an instant that there was any necessity for you to go to the Department of Mysteries tonight. If I had been open with you, Harry, as I should have been, you would have known a long time ago that Voldemort might try and lure you to the Department of Mysteries, and you would never have been tricked into going there tonight. And Sirius would not have had to come after you. That blame lies with me, and with me alone.”

Harry was still standing with his hand on the doorknob but he was unaware of it. He was gazing at Dumbledore, hardly breathing, listening yet barely understanding what he was hearing.

“Please sit down,” said Dumbledore. It was not an order, it was a request.

Harry hesitated, then walked slowly across the room now littered with silver cogs and fragments of wood and took the seat facing Dumbledore’s desk.

“Am I to understand,” said Phineas Nigellus slowly from Harry’s left, “that my great-great-grandson — the last of the Blacks — is dead?”

“Yes, Phineas,” said Dumbledore.

“I don’t believe it,” said Phineas brusquely.

Harry turned his head in time to see Phineas marching out of his portrait and knew that he had gone to visit his other painting in Grimmauld Place. He would walk, perhaps, from portrait to portrait, calling for Sirius through the house.

“Harry, I owe you an explanation,” said Dumbledore. “An explanation of an old man’s mistakes. For I see now that what I have done, and not done, with regard to you, bears all the hallmarks of the failings of age. Youth cannot know how age thinks and feels. But old men are guilty if they forget what it was to be young . . . and I seem to have forgotten lately . . .”

The sun was rising properly now. There was a rim of dazzling orange visible over the mountains and the sky above it was colorless and bright. The light fell upon Dumbledore, upon the silver of his eyebrows and beard, upon the lines gouged deeply into his face.

“I guessed, fifteen years ago,” said Dumbledore, “when I saw the scar upon your forehead, what it might mean. I guessed that it might be the sign of a connection forged between you and Voldemort.”

“You’ve told me this before, Professor,” said Harry bluntly. He did not care about being rude. He did not care about anything very much anymore.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore apologetically. “Yes, but you see — it is necessary to start with your scar. For it became apparent, shortly after you rejoined the magical world, that I was correct, and that your scar was giving you warnings when Voldemort was close to you, or else feeling powerful emotion.”

“I know,” said Harry wearily.

“And this ability of yours — to detect Voldemort’s presence, even when he is disguised, and to know what he is feeling when his emotions are roused — has become more and more pronounced since Voldemort returned to his own body and his full powers.”

Harry did not bother to nod. He knew all of this already.

“More recently,” said Dumbledore, “I became concerned that Voldemort might realize that this connection between you exists. Sure enough, there came a time when you entered so far into his mind and thoughts that he sensed your presence. I am speaking, of course, of the night when you witnessed the attack on Mr. Weasley.”

“Yeah, Snape told me,” Harry muttered.

“*Professor* Snape, Harry,” Dumbledore corrected him quietly. “But did you not wonder why it was not I who explained this to you? Why I did not teach you Occlumency? Why I had not so much as looked at you for months?”

Harry looked up. He could see now that Dumbledore looked sad and tired.

“Yeah,” Harry mumbled. “Yeah, I wondered.”

“You see,” continued Dumbledore heavily, “I believed it could not be long before Voldemort attempted to force his way into your mind, to manipulate and misdirect your thoughts, and I was not eager to give him more incentives to do so. I was sure that if he realized that our relationship was — or had ever been — closer than that of headmaster and pupil, he would seize his chance to use you as a means to spy on me. I feared the uses to which he would put you, the possibility that he might try and possess you. Harry, I believe I was right to think that Voldemort would have made use of you in such a way. On those rare occasions when we had close contact, I thought I saw a shadow of him stir behind your eyes. . . . I was trying, in distancing myself from you, to protect you. An old man’s mistake . . .”

Harry remembered the feeling that a dormant snake had risen in

him, ready to strike, on those occasions when he and Dumbledore made eye contact.

“Voldemort’s aim in possessing you, as he demonstrated tonight, would not have been my destruction. It would have been yours. He hoped, when he possessed you briefly a short while ago, that I would sacrifice you in the hope of killing him.”

He sighed deeply. Harry was letting the words wash over him. He would have been so interested to know all this a few months ago, and now it was meaningless compared to the gaping chasm inside him that was the loss of Sirius, none of it mattered . . .

“Sirius told me that you felt Voldemort awake inside you the very night that you had the vision of Arthur Weasley’s attack. I knew at once that my worst fears were correct: Voldemort from that point had realized he could use you. In an attempt to arm you against Voldemort’s assaults on your mind, I arranged Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape.”

He paused. Harry watched the sunlight, which was sliding slowly across the polished surface of Dumbledore’s desk, illuminate a silver ink pot and a handsome scarlet quill. Harry could tell that the portraits all around them were awake and listening raptly to Dumbledore’s explanation. He could hear the occasional rustle of robes, the slight clearing of a throat. Phineas Nigellus had still not returned. . . .

“Professor Snape discovered,” Dumbledore resumed, “that you had been dreaming about the door to the Department of Mysteries for months. Voldemort, of course, had been obsessed with the possibility of hearing the prophecy ever since he regained his body, and as he

dwelled on the door, so did you, though you did not know what it meant.

“And then you saw Rookwood, who worked in the Department of Mysteries before his arrest, telling Voldemort what we had known all along — that the prophecies held in the Ministry of Magic are heavily protected. Only the people to whom they refer can lift them from the shelves without suffering madness. In this case, either Voldemort himself would have to enter the Ministry of Magic and risk revealing himself at last — or else you would have to take it for him. It became a matter of even greater urgency that you should master Occlumency.”

“But I didn’t,” muttered Harry. He said it aloud to try and ease the dead weight of guilt inside him; a confession must surely relieve some of the terrible pressure squeezing his heart. “I didn’t practice, I didn’t bother, I could’ve stopped myself having those dreams, Hermione kept telling me to do it, if I had he’d never have been able to show me where to go, and — Sirius wouldn’t — Sirius wouldn’t —”

Something was erupting inside Harry’s head: a need to justify himself, to explain —

“I tried to check he’d really taken Sirius, I went to Umbridge’s office, I spoke to Kreacher in the fire, and he said Sirius wasn’t there, he said he’d gone!”

“Kreacher lied,” said Dumbledore calmly. “You are not his master, he could lie to you without even needing to punish himself. Kreacher intended you to go to the Ministry of Magic.”

“He — he sent me on purpose?”

“Oh yes. Kreacher, I am afraid, has been serving more than one master for months.”

“How?” said Harry blankly. “He hasn’t been out of Grimmauld Place for years.”

“Kreacher seized his opportunity shortly before Christmas,” said Dumbledore, “when Sirius, apparently, shouted at him to ‘get out.’ He took Sirius at his word and interpreted this as an order to leave the house. He went to the only Black family member for whom he had any respect left. . . . Black’s cousin Narcissa, sister of Bellatrix and wife of Lucius Malfoy.”

“How do you know all this?” Harry said. His heart was beating very fast. He felt sick. He remembered worrying about Kreacher’s odd absence over Christmas, remembered him turning up again in the attic. . . .

“Kreacher told me last night,” said Dumbledore. “You see, when you gave Professor Snape that cryptic warning, he realized that you had had a vision of Sirius trapped in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries. He, like you, attempted to contact Sirius at once. I should explain that members of the Order of the Phoenix have more reliable methods of communicating than the fire in Dolores Umbridge’s office. Professor Snape found that Sirius was alive and safe in Grimmauld Place.

“When, however, you did not return from your trip into the forest with Dolores Umbridge, Professor Snape grew worried that you still believed Sirius to be a captive of Lord Voldemort’s. He alerted certain Order members at once.”

Dumbledore heaved a great sigh and then said, “Alastor Moody,

Nymphadora Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Remus Lupin were at headquarters when he made contact. All agreed to go to your aid at once. Professor Snape requested that Sirius remain behind, as he needed somebody to remain at headquarters to tell me what had happened, for I was due there at any moment. In the meantime he, Professor Snape, intended to search the forest for you.

“But Sirius did not wish to remain behind while the others went to search for you. He delegated to Kreacher the task of telling me what had happened. And so it was that when I arrived in Grimmauld Place shortly after they had all left for the Ministry, it was the elf who told me — laughing fit to burst — where Sirius had gone.”

“He was laughing?” said Harry in a hollow voice.

“Oh yes,” said Dumbledore. “You see, Kreacher was not able to betray us totally. He is not Secret-Keeper for the Order; he could not give the Malfoys our whereabouts or tell them any of the Order’s confidential plans that he had been forbidden to reveal. He was bound by the enchantments of his kind, which is to say that he could not disobey a direct order from his master, Sirius. But he gave Narcissa information of the sort that is very valuable to Voldemort, yet must have seemed much too trivial for Sirius to think of banning him from repeating it.”

“Like what?” said Harry.

“Like the fact that the person Sirius cared most about in the world was you,” said Dumbledore quietly. “Like the fact that you were coming to regard Sirius as a mixture of father and brother. Voldemort knew already, of course, that Sirius was in the Order, that you knew where he was — but Kreacher’s information made him realize that

the one person whom you would go to any lengths to rescue was Sirius Black.”

Harry’s lips were cold and numb.

“So . . . when I asked Kreacher if Sirius was there last night . . .”

“The Malfoys — undoubtedly on Voldemort’s instructions — had told him he must find a way of keeping Sirius out of the way once you had seen the vision of Sirius being tortured. Then, if you decided to check whether Sirius was at home or not, Kreacher would be able to pretend he was not. Kreacher injured Buckbeak the hippogriff yesterday, and at the moment when you made your appearance in the fire, Sirius was upstairs trying to tend to him.”

There seemed to be very little air in Harry’s lungs, his breathing was quick and shallow.

“And Kreacher told you all this . . . and laughed?” he croaked.

“He did not wish to tell me,” said Dumbledore. “But I am a sufficiently accomplished Legilimens myself to know when I am being lied to and I — persuaded him — to tell me the full story, before I left for the Department of Mysteries.”

“And,” whispered Harry, his hands curled in cold fists on his knees, “and Hermione kept telling us to be nice to him —”

“She was quite right, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “I warned Sirius when we adopted twelve Grimmauld Place as our headquarters that Kreacher must be treated with kindness and respect. I also told him that Kreacher could be dangerous to us. I do not think that Sirius took me very seriously, or that he ever saw Kreacher as a being with feelings as acute as a human’s —”

“Don’t you blame — don’t you — talk — about Sirius like —”

Harry's breath was constricted, he could not get the words out properly. But the rage that had subsided so briefly had flared in him again; he would not let Dumbledore criticize Sirius. "Kreacher's a lying — foul — he deserved —"

"Kreacher is what he has been made by wizards, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Yes, he is to be pitied. His existence has been as miserable as your friend Dobby's. He was forced to do Sirius's bidding, because Sirius was the last of the family to which he was enslaved, but he felt no true loyalty to him. And whatever Kreacher's faults, it must be admitted that Sirius did nothing to make Kreacher's lot easier —"

"DON'T TALK ABOUT SIRIUS LIKE THAT!" Harry yelled.

He was on his feet again, furious, ready to fly at Dumbledore, who had plainly not understood Sirius at all, how brave he was, how much he had suffered . . .

"What about Snape?" Harry spat. "You're not talking about him, are you? When I told him Voldemort had Sirius he just sneered at me as usual —"

"Harry, you know that Professor Snape had no choice but to pretend not to take you seriously in front of Dolores Umbridge," said Dumbledore steadily, "but as I have explained, he informed the Order as soon as possible about what you had said. It was he who deduced where you had gone when you did not return from the forest. It was he too who gave Professor Umbridge fake Veritaserum when she was attempting to force you to tell of Sirius's whereabouts. . . ."

Harry disregarded this; he felt a savage pleasure in blaming Snape, it seemed to be easing his own sense of dreadful guilt, and he wanted

to hear Dumbledore agree with him.

“Snape — Snape g-goaded Sirius about staying in the house — he made out Sirius was a coward —”

“Sirius was much too old and clever to have allowed such feeble taunts to hurt him,” said Dumbledore.

“Snape stopped giving me Occlumency lessons!” Harry snarled. “He threw me out of his office!”

“I am aware of it,” said Dumbledore heavily. “I have already said that it was a mistake for me not to teach you myself, though I was sure, at the time, that nothing could have been more dangerous than to open your mind even further to Voldemort while in my presence —”

“Snape made it worse, my scar always hurt worse after lessons with him —” Harry remembered Ron’s thoughts on the subject and plunged on. “How do you know he wasn’t trying to soften me up for Voldemort, make it easier for him to get inside my —”

“I trust Severus Snape,” said Dumbledore simply. “But I forgot — another old man’s mistake — that some wounds run too deep for the healing. I thought Professor Snape could overcome his feelings about your father — I was wrong.”

“But that’s okay, is it?” yelled Harry, ignoring the scandalized faces and disapproving mutterings of the portraits covering the walls. “It’s okay for Snape to hate my dad, but it’s not okay for Sirius to hate Kreacher?”

“Sirius did not hate Kreacher,” said Dumbledore. “He regarded him as a servant unworthy of much interest or notice. Indifference and neglect often do much more damage than outright dislike. . . . The fountain we destroyed tonight told a lie. We wizards have mistreated

and abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward.”

“SO SIRIUS DESERVED WHAT HE GOT, DID HE?” Harry yelled.

“I did not say that, nor will you ever hear me say it,” Dumbledore replied quietly. “Sirius was not a cruel man, he was kind to house-elves in general. He had no love for Kreacher, because Kreacher was a living reminder of the home Sirius had hated.”

“Yeah, he did hate it!” said Harry, his voice cracking, turning his back on Dumbledore and walking away. The sun was bright inside the room now, and the eyes of all the portraits followed him as he walked, without realizing what he was doing, without seeing the office at all. “You made him stay shut up in that house and he hated it, that’s why he wanted to get out last night —”

“I was trying to keep Sirius alive,” said Dumbledore quietly.

“People don’t like being locked up!” Harry said furiously, rounding on him. “You did it to me all last summer —”

Dumbledore closed his eyes and buried his face in his long-fingered hands. Harry watched him, but this uncharacteristic sign of exhaustion, or sadness, or whatever it was from Dumbledore, did not soften him. On the contrary, he felt even angrier that Dumbledore was showing signs of weakness. He had no business being weak when Harry wanted to rage and storm at him.

Dumbledore lowered his hands and surveyed Harry through his half-moon glasses.

“It is time,” he said, “for me to tell you what I should have told you five years ago, Harry. Please sit down. I am going to tell you

everything. I ask only a little patience. You will have your chance to rage at me — to do whatever you like — when I have finished. I will not stop you.”

Harry glared at him for a moment, then flung himself back into the chair opposite Dumbledore and waited. Dumbledore stared for a moment at the sunlit grounds outside the window, then looked back at Harry and said, “Five years ago you arrived at Hogwarts, Harry, safe and whole, as I had planned and intended. Well — not quite whole. You had suffered. I knew you would when I left you on your aunt and uncle’s doorstep. I knew. I was condemning you to ten dark and difficult years.”

He paused. Harry said nothing.

“You might ask — and with good reason — why it had to be so. Why could some Wizarding family not have taken you in? Many would have done so more than gladly, would have been honored and delighted to raise you as a son.

“My answer is that my priority was to keep you alive. You were in more danger than perhaps anyone but myself realized. Voldemort had been vanquished hours before, but his supporters — and many of them are almost as terrible as he — were still at large, angry, desperate, and violent. And I had to make my decision too with regard to the years ahead. Did I believe that Voldemort was gone forever? No. I knew not whether it would be ten, twenty, or fifty years before he returned, but I was sure he would do so, and I was sure too, knowing him as I have done, that he would not rest until he killed you.

“I knew that Voldemort’s knowledge of magic is perhaps more

extensive than any wizard alive. I knew that even my most complex and powerful protective spells and charms were unlikely to be invincible if he ever returned to full power.

“But I knew too where Voldemort was weak. And so I made my decision. You would be protected by an ancient magic of which he knows, which he despises, and which he has always, therefore, underestimated — to his cost. I am speaking, of course, of the fact that your mother died to save you. She gave you a lingering protection he never expected, a protection that flows in your veins to this day. I put my trust, therefore, in your mother’s blood. I delivered you to her sister, her only remaining relative.”

“She doesn’t love me,” said Harry at once. “She doesn’t give a damn —”

“But she took you,” Dumbledore cut across him. “She may have taken you grudgingly, furiously, unwillingly, bitterly, yet still she took you, and in doing so, she sealed the charm I placed upon you. Your mother’s sacrifice made the bond of blood the strongest shield I could give you.”

“I still don’t —”

“While you can still call home the place where your mother’s blood dwells, there you cannot be touched or harmed by Voldemort. He shed her blood, but it lives on in you and her sister. Her blood became your refuge. You need return there only once a year, but as long as you can still call it home, there he cannot hurt you. Your aunt knows this. I explained what I had done in the letter I left, with you, on her doorstep. She knows that allowing you houseroom may well have kept you alive for the past fifteen years.”

“Wait,” said Harry. “Wait a moment.”

He sat up straighter in his chair, staring at Dumbledore.

“You sent that Howler. You told her to remember — it was your voice —”

“I thought,” said Dumbledore, inclining his head slightly, “that she might need reminding of the pact she had sealed by taking you. I suspected the dementor attack might have awoken her to the dangers of having you as a surrogate son.”

“It did,” said Harry quietly. “Well — my uncle more than her. He wanted to chuck me out, but after the Howler came she — she said I had to stay.” He stared at the floor for a moment, then said, “But what’s this got to do with . . .”

He could not say Sirius’s name.

“Five years ago, then,” continued Dumbledore, as though he had not paused in his story, “you arrived at Hogwarts, neither as happy nor as well nourished as I would have liked, perhaps, yet alive and healthy. You were not a pampered little prince, but as normal a boy as I could have hoped under the circumstances. Thus far, my plan was working well.

“And then . . . well, you will remember the events of your first year at Hogwarts quite as clearly as I do. You rose magnificently to the challenge that faced you, and sooner — much sooner — than I had anticipated, you found yourself face-to-face with Voldemort. You survived again. You did more. You delayed his return to full power and strength. You fought a man’s fight. I was . . . prouder of you than I can say.

“Yet there was a flaw in this wonderful plan of mine,” said

Dumbledore. "An obvious flaw that I knew, even then, might be the undoing of it all. And yet, knowing how important it was that my plan should succeed, I told myself that I would not permit this flaw to ruin it. I alone could prevent this, so I alone must be strong. And here was my first test, as you lay in the hospital wing, weak from your struggle with Voldemort."

"I don't understand what you're saying," said Harry.

"Don't you remember asking me, as you lay in the hospital wing, why Voldemort had tried to kill you when you were a baby?"

Harry nodded.

"Ought I to have told you then?"

Harry stared into the blue eyes and said nothing, but his heart was racing again.

"You do not see the flaw in the plan yet? No . . . perhaps not. Well, as you know, I decided not to answer you. Eleven, I told myself, was much too young to know. I had never intended to tell you when you were eleven. The knowledge would be too much at such a young age.

"I should have recognized the danger signs then. I should have asked myself why I did not feel more disturbed that you had already asked me the question to which I knew, one day, I must give a terrible answer. I should have recognized that I was too happy to think that I did not have to do it on that particular day. . . . You were too young, much too young.

"And so we entered your second year at Hogwarts. And once again you met challenges even grown wizards have never faced. Once again you acquitted yourself beyond my wildest dreams. You did not ask me again, however, why Voldemort had left that mark

upon you. We discussed your scar, oh yes. . . . We came very, very close to the subject. Why did I not tell you everything?

“Well, it seemed to me that twelve was, after all, hardly better than eleven to receive such information. I allowed you to leave my presence, bloodstained, exhausted but exhilarated, and if I felt a twinge of unease that I ought, perhaps, to have told you then, it was swiftly silenced. You were still so young, you see, and I could not find it in me to spoil that night of triumph. . . .

“Do you see, Harry? Do you see the flaw in my brilliant plan now? I had fallen into the trap I had foreseen, that I had told myself I could avoid, that I must avoid.”

“I don’t —”

“I cared about you too much,” said Dumbledore simply. “I cared more for your happiness than your knowing the truth, more for your peace of mind than my plan, more for your life than the lives that might be lost if the plan failed. In other words, I acted exactly as Voldemort expects we fools who love to act.

“Is there a defense? I defy anyone who has watched you as I have — and I have watched you more closely than you can have imagined — not to want to save you more pain than you had already suffered. What did I care if numbers of nameless and faceless people and creatures were slaughtered in the vague future, if in the here and now you were alive, and well, and happy? I never dreamed that I would have such a person on my hands.

“We entered your third year. I watched from afar as you struggled to repel dementors, as you found Sirius, learned what he was and rescued him. Was I to tell you then, at the moment when you had

triumphantly snatched your godfather from the jaws of the Ministry? But now, at the age of thirteen, my excuses were running out. Young you might be, but you had proved you were exceptional. My conscience was uneasy, Harry. I knew the time must come soon.

“But you came out of the maze last year, having watched Cedric Diggory die, having escaped death so narrowly yourself . . . and I did not tell you, though I knew, now Voldemort had returned, I must do it soon. And now, tonight, I know you have long been ready for the knowledge I have kept from you for so long, because you have proved that I should have placed the burden upon you before this. My only defense is this: I have watched you struggling under more burdens than any student who has ever passed through this school, and I could not bring myself to add another — the greatest one of all.”

Harry waited, but Dumbledore did not speak.

“I still don’t understand.”

“Voldemort tried to kill you when you were a child because of a prophecy made shortly before your birth. He knew the prophecy had been made, though he did not know its full contents. He set out to kill you when you were still a baby, believing he was fulfilling the terms of the prophecy. He discovered, to his cost, that he was mistaken, when the curse intended to kill you backfired. And so, since his return to his body, and particularly since your extraordinary escape from him last year, he has been determined to hear that prophecy in its entirety. This is the weapon he has been seeking so assiduously since his return: the knowledge of how to destroy you.”

The sun had risen fully now. Dumbledore’s office was bathed in it.

The glass case in which the sword of Godric Gryffindor resided gleamed white and opaque, the fragments of the instruments Harry had thrown to the floor glistened like raindrops, and behind him, the baby Fawkes made soft chirruping noises in his nest of ashes.

“The prophecy’s smashed,” Harry said blankly. “I was pulling Neville up those benches in the — the room where the archway was, and I ripped his robes and it fell . . .”

“The thing that smashed was merely the record of the prophecy kept by the Department of Mysteries. But the prophecy was made to somebody, and that person has the means of recalling it perfectly.”

“Who heard it?” asked Harry, though he thought he knew the answer already.

“I did,” said Dumbledore. “On a cold, wet night sixteen years ago, in a room above the bar at the Hog’s Head Inn. I had gone there to see an applicant for the post of Divination teacher, though it was against my inclination to allow the subject of Divination to continue at all. The applicant, however, was the great-great-granddaughter of a very famous, very gifted Seer, and I thought it common politeness to meet her. I was disappointed. It seemed to me that she had not a trace of the gift herself. I told her, courteously I hope, that I did not think she would be suitable for the post. I turned to leave.”

Dumbledore got to his feet and walked past Harry to the black cabinet that stood beside Fawkes’s perch. He bent down, slid back a catch, and took from inside it the shallow stone basin, carved with runes around the edges, in which Harry had seen his father tormenting Snape. Dumbledore walked back to the desk, placed the Pensieve upon it, and raised his wand to his own temple. From it, he withdrew

silvery, gossamer-fine strands of thought clinging to the wand, and deposited them in the basin. He sat back down behind his desk and watched his thoughts swirl and drift inside the Pensieve for a moment. Then, with a sigh, he raised his wand and prodded the silvery substance with its tip.

A figure rose out of it, draped in shawls, her eyes magnified to enormous size behind her glasses, and she revolved slowly, her feet in the basin. But when Sybill Trelawney spoke, it was not in her usual ethereal, mystic voice, but in the harsh, hoarse tones Harry had heard her use once before.

"THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES. . . . BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES. . . . AND THE DARK LORD WILL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT HE WILL HAVE POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT. . . . AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES. . . . THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD WILL BE BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES. . . ."

The slowly revolving Professor Trelawney sank back into the silver mass below and vanished.

The silence within the office was absolute. Neither Dumbledore nor Harry nor any of the portraits made a sound. Even Fawkes had fallen silent.

"Professor Dumbledore?" Harry said very quietly, for Dumbledore, still staring at the Pensieve, seemed completely lost in thought. "It . . . did that mean . . . What did that mean?"

"It meant," said Dumbledore, "that the person who has the only chance of conquering Lord Voldemort for good was born at the end of

July, nearly sixteen years ago. This boy would be born to parents who had already defied Voldemort three times.”

Harry felt as though something was closing in upon him. His breathing seemed difficult again.

“It means — me?”

Dumbledore took a deep breath.

“The odd thing is, Harry,” he said softly, “that it may not have meant you at all. Sybill’s prophecy could have applied to two wizard boys, both born at the end of July that year, both of whom had parents in the Order of the Phoenix, both sets of parents having narrowly escaped Voldemort three times. One, of course, was you. The other was Neville Longbottom.”

“But then . . . but then, why was it my name on the prophecy and not Neville’s?”

“The official record was relabeled after Voldemort’s attack on you as a child,” said Dumbledore. “It seemed plain to the keeper of the Hall of Prophecy that Voldemort could only have tried to kill you because he knew you to be the one to whom Sybill was referring.”

“Then — it might not be me?” said Harry.

“I am afraid,” said Dumbledore slowly, looking as though every word cost him a great effort, “that there is no doubt that it *is* you.”

“But you said — Neville was born at the end of July too — and his mum and dad —”

“You are forgetting the next part of the prophecy, the final identifying feature of the boy who could vanquish Voldemort. . . . Voldemort himself would ‘mark him as his equal.’ And so he did, Harry. He chose you, not Neville. He gave you the scar that has

proved both blessing and curse.”

“But he might have chosen wrong!” said Harry. “He might have marked the wrong person!”

“He chose the boy he thought most likely to be a danger to him,” said Dumbledore. “And notice this, Harry. He chose, not the pureblood (which, according to his creed, is the only kind of wizard worth being or knowing), but the half-blood, like himself. He saw himself in you before he had ever seen you, and in marking you with that scar, he did not kill you, as he intended, but gave you powers, and a future, which have fitted you to escape him not once, but four times so far — something that neither your parents, nor Neville’s parents, ever achieved.”

“Why did he do it, then?” said Harry, who felt numb and cold. “Why did he try and kill me as a baby? He should have waited to see whether Neville or I looked more dangerous when we were older and tried to kill whoever it was then —”

“That might, indeed, have been the more practical course,” said Dumbledore, “except that Voldemort’s information about the prophecy was incomplete. The Hog’s Head Inn, which Sybill chose for its cheapness, has long attracted, shall we say, a more interesting clientele than the Three Broomsticks. As you and your friends found out to your cost, and I to mine that night, it is a place where it is never safe to assume you are not being overheard. Of course, I had not dreamed, when I set out to meet Sybill Trelawney, that I would hear anything worth overhearing. My — our — one stroke of good fortune was that the eavesdropper was detected only a short way into the prophecy and thrown from the building.”

“So he only heard . . . ?”

“He heard only the first part, the part foretelling the birth of a boy in July to parents who had thrice defied Voldemort. Consequently, he could not warn his master that to attack you would be to risk transferring power to you — again marking you as his equal. So Voldemort never knew that there might be danger in attacking you, that it might be wise to wait or to learn more. He did not know that you would have ‘power the Dark Lord knows not’ —”

“But I don’t!” said Harry in a strangled voice. “I haven’t any powers he hasn’t got, I couldn’t fight the way he did tonight, I can’t possess people or — or kill them —”

“There is a room in the Department of Mysteries,” interrupted Dumbledore, “that is kept locked at all times. It contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than forces of nature. It is also, perhaps, the most mysterious of the many subjects for study that reside there. It is the power held within that room that you possess in such quantities and which Voldemort has not at all. That power took you to save Sirius tonight. That power also saved you from possession by Voldemort, because he could not bear to reside in a body so full of the force he detests. In the end, it mattered not that you could not close your mind. It was your heart that saved you.”

Harry closed his eyes. If he had not gone to save Sirius, Sirius would not have died. . . . More to stave off the moment when he would have to think of Sirius again, Harry asked, without caring much about the answer, “The end of the prophecy . . . it was something about . . . *‘neither can live . . . ’*”

“... *while the other survives,*” said Dumbledore.

“So,” said Harry, dredging up the words from what felt like a deep well of despair inside him, “so does that mean that . . . that one of us has got to kill the other one . . . in the end?”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. Somewhere far beyond the office walls, Harry could hear the sound of voices, students heading down to the Great Hall for an early breakfast, perhaps. It seemed impossible that there could be people in the world who still desired food, who laughed, who neither knew nor cared that Sirius Black was gone forever. Sirius seemed a million miles away already, even if a part of Harry still believed that if he had only pulled back that veil, he would have found Sirius looking back at him, greeting him, perhaps, with his laugh like a bark. . . .

“I feel I owe you another explanation, Harry,” said Dumbledore hesitantly. “You may, perhaps, have wondered why I never chose you as a prefect? I must confess . . . that I rather thought . . . you had enough responsibility to be going on with.”

Harry looked up at him and saw a tear trickling down Dumbledore’s face into his long silver beard.

Die verlore profesie

Harry se voete tref die grond, sy knieë swik effens en die goue toewenaar se kop val klaterend op die vloer. Hy kyk rond en sien hy is in Dompeldorius se kantoor.

Dit lyk of alles in die skoolhoof se afwesigheid vanself heel geword het, want die delikate silwer instrumente staan weer tikkend en gonsend op die speekbeentafelhjies. Die portrette van die skoolhoofde slaap in hul rame teen die mure, hul koppe teen die leunstoele se rugkante of teen die kant van hul portret. Harry kyk deur die venster en sien 'n bleekgroen streep teen die horison; dit is amper dagbreek.

Hy vind die stilte, wat net af en toe deur 'n gegrom of 'n snuif in 'n slapende portret verbreek word, feitlik ondraaglik. As sy omgewing sy gevoelens moes weerspieël, sou die prente van pyn geskree het. Sy asem jaag terwyl hy deur die stil kantoor stap. Hy doen sy bes om aan niks te dink nie, maar hy moet dink . . . hy kan nie anders nie . . .

Dis sy skuld dat Sirius dood is, dis alles sy skuld. As hy nie so dom was om hom deur Woldemort se slenter te laat vang nie, as hy nie so seker was sy droom is waar nie, as hy net bereid was om dit te oorweeg of Woldemort nie, soos Hermien gesê het, op sy behoefte om 'n held te wees, reken nie . . .

Dis ondraaglik, hy kan nie daaraan dink nie, hy kan dit nie verduur nie . . . As die aaklige hol gevoel in hom net wil weggaan, die donker gat waar Sirius was, waarin Sirius verdwyn het. Hy wil nie alleen daarmee wees nie, hy kan dit nie hou nie –

Agter hom snork 'n portret besonder hard en 'n koel stem sê: “A . . . Harry Potter . . .”

Phineas Nigellus gaap lank, strek sy arms en kyk deur skrandere skrefiesoë na Harry.

“En hoekom is jy hierdie tyd van die oggend in die kantoor?” vra hy eindelijk. “Hierdie kantoor is veronderstel om vir almal behalwe

die skoolhoof gesluit te wees. Of het Dompeldorius jou hierheen gestuur? Ag, moenie sê nie . . .” Hy gaap sidderend. “Dis seker nog ’n boodskap vir my nuttelose agteragterkleinseun, of hoe?”

Harry kan nie praat nie. Phineas Nigellus weet nie dat Sirius dood is nie, maar Harry kan dit nie vir hom sê nie. Om dit hardop te sê, sal dit finaal, absoluut, onomkeerbaar maak.

Nog ’n paar portrette roer. Sy angst vir die ondervraging wat gaan volg, veroorsaak dat Harry na die deur stap en sy hand op die knop sit.

Dit wil nie draai nie. Hy kan nie uit nie.

“Ek hoop dit beteken,” sê die vet towenaar met die rooi neus agter die skoolhoof se lessenaar, “dat Dompeldorius binnekort gaan terugkom?”

Harry draai om. Die towenaar kyk belangstellend na hom en Harry knik. Toe ruk hy weer aan die deurknop, maar dit roer nie.

“Dis goed,” sê die towenaar. “Dit was baie vervelig sonder hom hier, inderdaad baie vervelig.”

Hy skuif reg op die troonagtige stoel waarop hy geskilder is en glimlag innemend vir Harry.

“Dompeldorius dink baie van jou, soos jy seker weet,” sê hy vriendelik. “O ja, hy’t ’n baie hoë dunk van jou.”

’n Vretende skuldgevoel vul Harry se borskas soos ’n monsteragtige parasiet wat rondkrioel. Hy kan dit amper nie verduur nie. Hy kan nie langer verduur om homself te wees nie . . . hy voel soos ’n gevangene in sy eie kop en liggaam, hy’t nog nooit meer intens gewens dat hy iemand anders was nie, enigiemand anders . . .

Die dooie kaggel bars uit in smaraggroen vlamme. Harry spring weg van die deur en staar na die man wat in die kaggel tol. Toe Dompeldorius se lang gestalte uit die vuur klim, word al die towenaars en hekse teen die mure wakker en die meeste van hulle roep ’n verwelkoming uit.

“Dankie,” sê Dompeldorius sag.

Hy kyk eers nie na Harry nie, maar stap reguit na die stok langs die deur, haal die klein, verrimpelde, veerlose Fawkes uit sy sak en sit hom sorgsaam op die bord vol sagte as neer onder die goue stok waar die uitgegroeide Fawkes gewoonlik staan.

“Wel, Harry,” sê Dompeldorius toe hy eindelik van die baba-voëltjie wegdraai, “jy sal bly wees om te hoor dat geeneen van jou maats blywende skade sal oorthou ná die nag se gebeure nie.”

Harry probeer “dis goed” sê, maar geen geluid kom uit nie. Hoewel Dompeldorius nie beskuldigend nie maar vriendelik klink, voel dit tog vir Harry of hy hom effens verwyt oor die skade wat

aangerig is. En hoewel Dompeldorius vir 'n verandering direk na hom kyk, kan Harry hom nie die oë kyk nie.

"Madame Pomfrey is besig om almal te dokter," sê Dompeldorius. "Nymphadora Tonks sal 'n rukkie in Sint Mungo wees, maar dit lyk of sy heeltemal sal herstel."

Harry knik bloot terwyl hy na die tapyt staar, wat ligter word soos die lug daar buite verhelder. Hy is seker dat al die portrette gretig na elke woord van Dompeldorius luister en wonder waar hulle was en hoekom mense beseer is.

"Ek weet hoe jy voel, Harry," sê Dompeldorius sag.

"Nee, niemand weet nie," sê Harry. Witwarm woede wel in hom op sodat sy stem hard en kwaai klink. Hoe kan Dompeldorius weet hoe hy voel? Hy weet niks.

"Sien jy, Dompeldorius," sê Phineas Nigellus listig. "Moet nooit probeer om die studente te verstaan nie. Hulle haat dit. Hulle wil veel eerder tragies misverstaan word, hulle verlekker in hul eie selfbejammering, gaar kook in hul eie –"

"Dis genoeg, Phineas," sê Dompeldorius.

Harry draai sy rug op Dompeldorius en staar gedetermineerd deur die venster. Hy kan die Kwiddiekstadion in die verte sien. Sirius was eenkeer daar, vermorn as 'n swart hond, om te sien hoe Harry speel . . . hy het seker kom kyk of Harry net so goed soos James is . . . Harry het nooit vir hom gevra nie . . .

"Dis nie 'n skande om so te voel nie, Harry," sê Dompeldorius agter hom. "Inteendeel . . . die feit dat jy hierdie pyn voel, is jou grootste krag."

Nou brand die woede witwarm in die pynlike lêë kol in Harry se gemoed. Hy wil vir Dompeldorius aanval, hoe kan hy so kalm wees? Hoe kan hy hierdie betekenislose dinge vir hom sê?

"My grootste krag, nè?" sê Harry en sy stem bewe. Hy staar nog steeds onsiende na die Kwiddiekstadion. "Wat weet jy? Jy weet niks . . ."

"Wat weet ek nie?" vra Dompeldorius bedaard.

Dis te erg. Harry draai bewend van woede om.

"Ek wil nie praat oor hoe ek voel nie, oukei!"

"Harry, hierdie pyn wys dat jy 'n mens is! Hierdie pyn is deel van jou menswees –"

"DAN – WIL – EK – NIE – 'N – MENS – WEES – NIE!" Harry raap 'n delikate silwer instrument van die speekbeentafeltjie langs hom op en slinger dit deur die vertrek. Dit breek in 'n honderd stukkies teen die oorkantste muur. Verskeie portrette uiter geskokte krete en die portret van Armando Dippet sê: "Liewe vader!"

"EK GEE NIE OM NIE!" gil Harry vir hulle. Hy gryp 'n maanskoop en gooi dit in die kaggel. "EK HET GENOEG GEHAD, EK HET GENOEG GESIEN, EK WIL NIE MEER NIE, DIT MOET OPHOU, EK GEE OOR NIKS MEER OM NIE!"

Hy gryp die tafeltjie waarop die silwer instrument gestaan het en smyt dit om. Dit spat uitmekaar en die pote rol oor die vloer.

"Jy gee om," sê Dompeldorius sonder om 'n spier te trek of die geringste poging aan te wend om Harry te keer. Sy gesig is strak, amper afgetrokke. "Jy gee soveel om, jy kan doodbloei van die pyn."

"EK – VOEL – NIKS!" Harry skree so hard dat dit voel of sy keel gaan oopskeur. Hy wil vir Dompeldorius bestorm en hom ook breek, sy kalm gesig verpletter, hom skud, hom seermaak sodat hy 'n bietjie kan voel hoe hy voel.

"O ja, jy voel," sê Dompeldorius nog kalmer. "Jy het reeds jou moeder en jou vader verloor, en nou die persoon naaste aan 'n ouer wat jy nog ooit gehad het. Natuurlik gee jy om."

"JY WEET NIE HOE EK VOEL NIE!" brul Harry. "JY – STAAN DAAR – JOU –"

Maar woorde is nie meer genoeg nie, dit help nie meer om goed te breek nie; hy wil hardloop en nooit weer ophou nie, nooit weer terugkyk nie, iewers wees waar hy nie die helderblou oë en die haatlike kalm ou gesig hoef te sien nie. Hy swaai om en storm na die deur, gryp die knop en pluk daaraan.

Die deur gaan nie oop nie.

Harry kyk na Dompeldorius. "Laat my uit," sê hy bewend van kop tot tone.

"Nee," sê Dompeldorius eenvoudig.

Hulle staar na mekaar vir 'n paar sekondes.

"Laat my uit!" herhaal Harry.

"Nee," sê Dompeldorius weer.

"As jy nie – as jy my hier hou – as jy my nie laat gaan –"

"Gaan gerus voort, verwoes al my besittings," sê Dompeldorius gelate. "Ek het heeltemal te veel."

Hy stap om die lessenaar en gaan sit, sy oë op Harry.

"Laat my gaan." Harry se stem is koud en amper net so kalm soos Dompeldorius s'n.

"Nie voor ek my sê gesê het nie," sê Dompeldorius.

"Dink jy – dink jy ek wil weet wat – dink jy ek gee hoegenaamd – EK WIL NIE WEET WAT JY WIL SÊ NIE!" skree Harry. "Ek wil niks hoor nie!"

"Jy wil," sê Dompeldorius bedaard. "Jy is nie naastenby so kwaad

vir my as wat jy behoort te wees nie. As jy my sou aanval, soos ek weet jy lus het, Harry, wil ek dit terdeë verdien het."

"Wat bedoel -?"

"Dis my skuld dat Sirius dood is," sê Dompeldorius nadruklik. "Of moet ek sê, amper ten volle my skuld - dit sal arrogant wees om alle blaam op my skouers te neem. Sirius was 'n dapper, slim, energieke man en sulke mense is selde tevrede om tuis te bly en weg te kruip wanneer hulle dink ander is in gevaar. Maar nietemin, dit moes nie vir jou vanaand nodig gewees het om te glo dat jy na die Departement vir Geheime moet gaan nie. As ek jare gelede openlik was met jou, Harry, sou jy geweet het Woldemort sal probeer om jou soontoe te lok. Dan sou hy dit nie vannag reggekry het nie, en Sirius sou jou nie gevolg het nie. Die blaam is myne en net myne."

Harry staan nog steeds met sy hand op die deurknop, maar hy is onbewus daarvan. Hy haal skaars asem, hy verstaan skaars wat Dompeldorius sê.

"Sit asseblief," sê Dompeldorius. Dit is nie 'n bevel nie, dit is 'n versoek

Harry aarsel voor hy stadig oor die vloer besaai met silwer ratte en houtsplinters stap en in 'n stoel oorkant Dompeldorius gaan sit.

"Verstaan ek dit reg," sê Phineas Nigellus dralend aan Harry se linkerkant, "dat my agteragterkleinseun, die laaste Swardt, dood is?"

"Ja, Phineas," sê Dompeldorius.

"Ek glo dit nie," sê Phineas kortaf.

Harry kyk net betyds op om te sien hoe Phineas uit sy portret stap. Harry weet hy is op pad na sy ander portret in Grimmauldplein en dat hy waarskynlik van portret na portret na Sirius sal soek.

"Harry, ek skuld jou 'n verduideliking," sê Dompeldorius. "'n Verklaring van 'n ou man se oordeelsloute. Want ek sien nou dat wat ek gedoen en nagelaat het om te doen wat jou betref al die tekens dra van die tekortkominge van die ouderdom. Die jeug kan nie weet hoe ou mense dink en voel nie. Maar ou mense as hulle vergeet hoe dit was om jonk te wees, is skuldig, en dit lyk of ek skuldig is daaraan. . ."

Die son is besig om op te kom. 'n Oranje gloed raak sigbaar bo die berge en die hemel is helder maar nog kleurloos. Die lig val op Dompeldorius, op sy silwer wenkbroue en baard, op die diep lyne wat in sy gesig gegroef is.

"Vyftien jaar gelede toe ek die litteken op jou voorkop sien, het ek geraai wat dit beteken," sê Dompeldorius. "Ek het vermoed dis dalk die teken van 'n verbintenis tussen jou en Woldemort."

"Jy het dit al vir my gesê, Professor," sê Harry kortaf. Dit kan hom nie skeel dat hy ongeskik is nie. Niks kan hom meer skeel nie.

"Ja," sê Dompeldorius verskonend. "Ja, maar jy sien – dis nodig om by jou litteken te begin. Want kort nadat jy by ons in die tower-wêreld aangesluit het, het dit duidelik geword dat ek reg was en dat jou litteken jou waarsku wanneer Woldemort naby jou is of sterk emosies ervaar."

"Ek weet," sê Harry moeg.

"En hierdie vermoë van jou om Woldemort se teenwoordigheid aan te voel selfs wanneer hy vermom is, en te weet wat hy voel as sy emosies opgewerk is, het gegroei sedert Woldemort sy eie liggaam en kragte herwin het."

Harry doen nie eens die moeite om te knik nie. Hy weet dit alles.

"Meer onlangs," sê Dompeldorius, "het ek my begin bekommer dat Woldemort van hierdie verbintenis bewus sal word. En op 'n dag het jy sy gedagtes so ver binnegedring dat hy jou teenwoordigheid aangevoel het. Ek praat natuurlik van die nag toe jy die aanval op meneer Weasley gesien het."

"Ja, Snerp het vir my gesê," mompel Harry.

"Professor Snerp, Harry," help Dompeldorius hom bedaar reg. "Maar het jy nie gewonder hoekom ek dit nie vir jou verduidelik het nie? Hoekom ek nie vir jou Okklumensie geleer het nie? Hoekom ek vir soveel maande nooit eens na jou gekyk het nie?"

Harry kyk op; Dompeldorius se gesig lyk oud en treurig.

"Ja," mompel Harry. "Ja, ek het gewonder."

"Jy sien," sê Dompeldorius, "ek het verwag dat Woldemort kort voor lank sal probeer om jou verstand binne te dring en jou gedagtes te manipuleer en in die verkeerde rigting te stuur. Ek wou nie vir hom nog redes gee om dit te wil doen nie. Ek het gedink dat indien hy glo ons is – of was – meer as bloot skoolhoof en skoolkind, hy jou sou gebruik om op my te spioeneer. Ek was bang vir wat hy aan jou sou doen, die moontlikheid dat hy jou sou besit. Harry, ek glo vas dat Woldemort jou só sou gebruik het. In daardie paar oomblikke wat ons in noue kontak was, het ek soms 'n skadu van hom in jou oë gesien . . ."

Harry onthou die gevoel van 'n slapende slang wat in hom wakker word, gereed om te pik, die kere dat hy en Dompeldorius oogkontak gemaak het.

"Soos hy vannag gedemonstreer het, was Woldemort se oogmerk nie my vernietiging nie, maar joune. Toe jy 'n kort rukkie deur hom besit was, het hy gehoop ek sou jou opoffer om hom te vernietig. Ek het jou probeer beskerm deur op 'n afstand te bly, Harry. 'n Ou man se fout . . ."

Hy sug diep. Harry laat die woorde oor hom spoel. 'n Paar

maande gelede sou dit hom baie geïnteresseer het, maar nou, ná die verlies van Sirius, maak niks meer saak nie . . .

"Sirius het vir my gesê jy het Woldemort in jou voel wakker word die nag toe jy Arthur Weasley se aanval gesien het. Ek het dadelik geweet my ergste vrees is bewaarheid: Woldemort het besef hy kan jou gebruik. In 'n poging om jou teen sy aanvalle te bewapen, het ek vir jou Okklumensie-lesse by professor Snerp gereël."

Hy bly stil. Harry kyk hoe die sonlig stadig oor Dompeldorius se blink gepoleerde lessenaar skuif en op 'n silwer inktpot en 'n pragtige skarlaken veerpen val. Hy sien dat al die portrette om hulle wakker is en met gespanne aandag na Dompeldorius se verduideliking luister. Hy hoor die ritseling van hul klede en effense kuggies. Phineas Nigellus is nog steeds weg . . .

"Professor Snerp het ontdek," gaan Dompeldorius voort, "dat jy reeds maande lank van die deur voor die Departement vir Geheime droom. Sedert Woldemort sy eie liggaam herwin het, is hy natuurlik behep met die moontlikheid om die presiese bewoording van die profesie te hoor. En aangesien hy gedurig aan die Departement vir Geheime se deur dink, het jy ook daaraan gedink, hoewel jy nie geweet het hoekom nie.

"En toe het jy gesien hoe Rookwood, wat voor sy arrestasie in die Departement vir Geheime gewerk het, vir Woldemort vertel wat ons nog altyd weet – dat die profesie in die Departement vir Geheime bewaak word. En net diegene waarna verwys word, kan die profesie afhaal sonder om mal te word. Dus sou Woldemort self die Ministerie vir Towerkuns moes binnedring en die kans waag dat hy gevang word, óf jy sou dit vir hom moes afhaal en gee. Dit was dus uiters belangrik dat jy Okklumensie bemeester."

"Maar ek het nie," mompel Harry hard in die hoop dat 'n skuld-erkenneris die vreeslike druk van skuld sou verlig. "Ek het nooit geoefen nie. Ek kon daardie drome gekeer het! Hermien het oor en oor vir my gesê ek moet. As ek dit gedoen het, sou ek nie soontoe gegaan het nie en – Sirius sou nie – Sirius sou nie –"

Iets ontplof in Harry se kop. Hy moet verduidelik wat gebeur het, hy moet homself probeer regverdig.

"Ek het probeer seker maak dat Sirius regtig gevang is! Ek het na Umbridge se kantoor gegaan en met Skepsel in die vuur gepraat en hy't gesê Sirius is nie daar nie, Sirius is weg!"

"Skepsel het gelieg," sê Dompeldorius kalm. "Jy is nie sy meester nie en hy kan vir jou lieg sonder om homself te moet straf. Skepsel wou hê jy moes na die Ministerie vir Towerkuns gaan."

"Hy – hy't dit aspris gedoen?"

"O ja. Ek is bevrees Skepsel dien al maande lank meer as een meester."

"Hoe?" vra Harry dof. "Hy was jare laas uit Grimmauldplein."

"Hy het sy kans net voor Kersfees aangegryp toe Sirius vir hom geskree het om te 'loop'. Hy het Sirius se woorde letterlik opgeneem en dit beskou as 'n bevel om die huis te verlaat. Hy't na die enigste Swardt-familielid gegaan vir wie hy enige respek oorgehad het . . . Swardt se niggie: Bellatrix se suster en Lucius Malfoy se vrou."

"Hoe weet julle dit alles?" Harry voel naar en sy hart klop baie vinnig. Hy onthou hy was bekommerd oor Skepsel se vreemde afwesigheid tydens Kerstyd, hy onthou hoe Sirius hom in die solder gevind het . . .

"Skepsel het laas nag vir my gesê. Jy sien, toe jy daardie kriptiese waarskuwing vir professor Snerp gegee het, het hy dadelik besef dis 'n visioen van Sirius as gevangene in die Departement vir Geheime. Soos jy het hy dadelik vir Sirius probeer kontak. Ek moet byvoeg dat die lede van die Orde van die Feniks meer betroubare metodes as Dolores se kaggelvuur het. Professor Snerp het uitgevind dat Sirius veilig in Grimmauldplein is."

"Toe jy egter nie terugkeer van jou uitstappie na die Woud saam met Dolores Umbridge nie, het hy vermoed dat jy nog steeds glo dat die heer Woldemort vir Sirius gevange hou. Hy het sekere lede van die Orde dadelik in kennis gestel."

Dompeldorius slaak 'n diep sug voor hy voortgaan. "Alastor Moodie, Nymphadora Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt en Remus Lupin was almal by Hoofkwartier toe hy kontak gemaak het. Almal was onmiddellik bereid om jou te gaan help. Professor Snerp het versoek dat Sirius agterbly omdat ek soontoe op pad was en daar iemand moes wees om my op hoogte van sake te bring. Intussen het Snerp besluit om jou in die Woud te gaan soek."

"Maar Sirius wou nie agterbly nie. Hy het vir Skepsel beveel om my in te lig. Toe ek dus kort daarna by Grimmauldplein kom, het die huiself – en hy wou hom slap lag daaroor – vir my gesê waarheen Sirius is."

"Hy het gelag?" vra Harry in 'n hol stem.

"O ja," sê Dompeldorius. "Jy sien, Skepsel kon ons nie ten volle verrai nie. Hy is nie die Orde se Bewaarder van Geheime nie. Hy kon nie vir Malfoy sê waar ons was of enige vertroulike planne uitlap nie. Hy is gebind deur die towermagte van sy soort, wat beteken dat hy nie direkte be vele van sy meester, Sirius, mag verontagsaam nie. Hy het wel vir Narcissa inligting gegee wat vir Woldemort baie

werd was, maar wat Sirius waarskynlik as so nietig beskou het dat hy nooit vir Skepsel verbied het om daaroor te praat nie."

"Soos wat?" sê Harry.

"Soos dat die persoon vir wie Sirius die meeste omgee jy is," sê Dompeldorius sag. "En dat Sirius vir jou iets tussen 'n pa en 'n broer is. Woldemort het natuurlik geweet Sirius is 'n lid van die Orde en dat jy weet waar hy is – maar nou het hy ook geweet jy sal enigiets doen om Sirius te probeer red."

"Toe ek gister vir Skepsel gevra het . . . of Sirius daar is . . ." Harry se lippe voel so koud dat hy skaars kan praat.

"Die Malfoys – ongetwyfeld in opdrag van Woldemort – het gesê Skepsel moet 'n plan maak om jou van Sirius af weg te hou nadat jy die visioen gesien het van Sirius wat gemartel word. Toe jy dus gaan kyk het of Sirius tuis is, het Skepsel voorgegee hy is nie daar nie. Skepsel het vir Bokbok beseer en Sirius was besig om die hippogrief te versorg toe jy in die vuur was."

Harry kan amper nie asemhaal nie.

"En toe Skepsel dit alles vertel het, het hy . . . gelag?" sê hy skor.

"Hy wou eers niks sê nie. Maar ek is self taamlik bedrewe met Legilimensie en ek het geweet hy lieg. Ek het hom . . . oorreed . . . om alles te vertel voor ek na die Departement vir Geheime gegaan het."

"En," fluister Harry, sy hande in koue vuiste op sy knieë geklem, "Hermien het aanmekaar vir ons gesê ons moet gaaf wees met hom."

"Sy was heeltemal reg, Harry," sê Dompeldorius. "Toe ons Grimmauldplein 12 as hoofkwartier ingerig het, het ek vir Sirius gemaak om Skepsel met respek en begrip te behandel en gewaarsku dat hy gevaarlik vir ons kan wees. Ek dink nie Sirius het my ernstig opgeneem of hom ooit as 'n wese met gevoelens gesien nie –"

"Moenie – moenie vir Sirius – blameer nie –" Harry kan amper nie die woorde uitkry nie. Sy woede, wat intussen effens bedaar het, vlam opnuut op. Hy sal nie toelaat dat Dompeldorius vir Sirius kritiseer nie. "Skepsel is 'n leuenaar – hy is vieslik – hy verdien –!"

"Skepsel is wat die towenaars van hom gemaak het, Harry. Ons moet hom eerder jammer kry. Sy bestaan is net so ellendig soos jou vriend Dobbi s'n. Hy moes maak soos Sirius sê omdat Sirius die laaste lid was van die familie waaraan hy gebonde was, maar hy het geen gevoel van loyaliteit teenoor Sirius gehad nie. En hoewel Skepsel foute het, moet ons erken dat Sirius nie sy lot probeer verlig het nie –"

"MOENIE SO OOR SIRIUS PRAAT NIE!" gil Harry.

Hy staan weer regop, verwoed, gereed om Dompeldorius te be-

vlieg. Dompeldorius verstaan nie vir Sirius nie, hoe dapper hy was, hoe swaar hy gekry het . . .

"Wat van Snerp?" sis Harry. "Niemand praat oor hom nie. Toe ek vir hom gesê het dat Woldemort vir Sirius het, het hy soos gewoonlik vir my gegrynsag –"

"Harry, jy weet tog professor Snerp kon nie voor Dolores Umbridge vir jou wys hy neem jou ernstig op nie," sê Dompeldorius rustig. "Professor Snerp het die Orde onmiddellik laat weet, soos ek reeds gesê het. Dit was hy wat afgelei het waarheen julle gegaan het toe julle nie uit die Woud teruggekeer het nie. Hy het ook vir professor Umbridge nagemaakte Veritaserum gegee toe sy jou wou dwing om te sê waar Sirius is."

Harry hoor dit skaars. Dit voel vreemd lekker om Snerp te blaameer, want dit laat hom effens minder skuldig voel. As Dompeldorius net met hom wil saamstem!

"Snerp – Snerp het vir Sirius g-getart oor hy in die huis bly – hy't geïmpliseer dat Sirius 'n lafaard is –"

"Sirius was glad te oud en slim om toe te laat dat so iets hom ontstel," sê Dompeldorius.

"Snerp het opgehou om vir my Okklumensie-lesse te gee!" snou Harry. "Hy't my uit sy kantoor geskop!"

"Ek weet," sê Dompeldorius swaar. "Ek het reeds erken ek het 'n fout gemaak deur jou nie self te leer nie. Maar ek was op daardie oomblik seker dat niks gevaarliker kon wees as om jou verstand verder vir Woldemort oop te stel wanneer jy by my is nie –"

"Snerp het dit erger gemaak! My litteken was altyd seerder ná sy klasse –" Harry onthou wat Ron gesê het en tier voort – hoe weet julle hy't my nie net saggemaak vir Woldemort nie? Dit vir hom makliker gemaak om my verstand binne te dring –"

"Ek vertrou vir Severus Snerp," sê Dompeldorius gelykmatig. "Maar ek het vergeet – weer eens 'n ou man se fout – dat sommige wonde te diep is om te genees. Ek het aanvaar dat professor Snerp sy gevoelens oor jou vader te bowe sou kom – ek was verkeerd."

"Maar dis alles oukei, nê?" skree Harry en ignoreer die skoolhoofde teen die mure se geskokte gesigte en verwytende geprewel. "Dis oukei dat Snerp my pa haat, maar dis nie oukei dat Sirius vir Skepsel haat nie?"

"Sirius het nie vir Skepsel gehaat nie," sê Dompeldorius. "Hy't hom bloot as 'n kneg beskou wat nie enige aandag werd is nie. Ongeërgdheid en onverskilligheid doen dikwels baie meer skade as haat . . . Die fontein wat ons vannag verwoes het, het nie die waar-

heid weerspíeël nie. Ons towenaars het ons medemense te lank uitgebuit en kry nou wat ons verdien."

"DAN HET SIRIUS VERDIEN WAT MET HOM GEBEUR HET?" skree Harry.

"Dis nie wat ek gesê het nie, en ek sal dit ook nooit sê nie," antwoord Dompeldorius sag. "Sirius was nie 'n wreedaard nie, hy was oor die algemeen baie verdraagsaam teenoor die huiselwe. Hy het nie van Skepsel gehou nie omdat Skepsel 'n lewende herinnering was aan die huis wat hy gehaat het."

"Ja, hy het dit gehaat!" Harry se stem breek. Hy draai sy rug op Dompeldorius en stap weg. Die son skyn nou helder in die vertrek en die portrette se oë volg hom soos hy deur die kantoor stap sonder om te besef wat hy doen, sonder om die kantoor te sien. "Jy't hom gedwing om in daardie huis te bly en hy het dit gehaat. Dis hoekom hy laas nag wou uitkom –"

"Ek het probeer om Sirius aan die lewe te hou," sê Dompeldorius sag.

"Mense hou nie daarvan om opgesluit te word nie!" sê Harry woedend. "Jy't dit die vorige somervakansie aan my gedoen . . ."

Dompeldorius sluit sy oë en bêre sy gesig in sy hande met die lang fingers. Harry staar na hom, maar nie eens hierdie ongewone tekens van uitputting of hartseer of wat ook al van Dompeldorius kan sy woede temper nie. Dit maak hom eerder kwater. Hoe durf Dompeldorius swak wees wanneer Harry sy woede op hom wil uithaal?

Dompeldorius laat sak sy hande en tuur deur sy halfmaanbril na Harry.

"Dis tyd," sê hy, "dat ek vir jou vertel wat ek vyf jaar gelede vir jou moes gesê het, Harry. Sit, asseblief. Ek gaan vir jou alles vertel. Ek vra net 'n bietjie geduld. Jy sal kans kry om my sleg te sê – of wat ook al – wanneer ek klaar is. Ek sal jou nie keer nie."

Harry gluur na hom. Dan slinger hy hom in die stoel oorkant Dompeldorius neer en wag.

Dompeldorius staar 'n rukkie na die sonverligte terrein voor die venster. Dan kyk hy na Harry. "Vyf jaar gelede het jy by Hogwarts opgedaag, Harry, veilig en ongedeerd, soos ek beplan het. Wel, nie heeltemal heel nie. Jy het swaargekry. Ek het dit verwag toe ek jou op jou oom en tante se drumpel gelaat het. Ek het geweet ek vonnis jou tot tien moeilike jare."

Hy bly stil, maar Harry sê niks.

"Jy mag dalk vra – en met rede – hoekom dit so moes wees. Hoekom kon 'n towenaarsfamilie jou nie grootmaak nie? Baie van

hulle sou dit met graagte gedoen het, dit as 'n eer beskou het om jou soos 'n eie seun groot te maak.

"My antwoord is dat my prioriteit was om jou lewend te hou. Jy was in groter gevaar as wat enigiemand behalwe ek kon dink. Woldemort is ure tevore verslaan, maar sy ondersteuners – en baie van hulle is amper net so wreed soos hy – was nog op vrye voet, kwaad, desperaat en gewelddadig. Ek het my besluit ook met die oog op die toekoms geneem. Kon ek eenvoudig aanneem dat Woldemort vir altyd weg sou wees? Nee. Ek het nie geweet of dit tien, twintig of vyftig jaar sou duur nie, maar ek het geweet hy sal terugkom. En omdat ek hom ken, was ek ook seker dat hy nie sou rus voor hy jou doodgemaak het nie.

"Woldemort se kennis van die towerkuns is baie groot, dalk groter as dié van enige ander lewende towenaar. Ek het gevrees dat selfs my ingewikkeldste en kragtigste beskermingstowerspreuke en -paljasse voor sy aanslag sou swig as hy sy kragte sou herwin.

"Maar ek het ook Woldemort se swakhede geken. En dis waarop ek my besluit gebaseer het. Jy sou beskerm word deur 'n eeue ou towerkuns wat hy ken, maar wat hy minag en wat hy dus altyd – tot sy nadeel – sou onderskat. Ek praat natuurlik van die feit dat jou moeder gesterf het om jou te beskerm. Sy het vir jou 'n langdurige beskerming gegee wat hy nie verwag het nie. Dit vloei nog steeds in jou are, en daarom het ek my vertrouwe in jou moeder se bloed geplaas en jou na haar suster geneem, haar enigste oorlewende familielid."

"Sy voel niks vir my nie," sê Harry dadelik. "Sy haat my –"

"Maar sy het jou geneem," val Dompeldorius hom in die rede. "Toegegee, sy was teësinig, kwaad, onwillig, bitter, maar sy het jou nog steeds geneem en deur dit te doen, het sy die towerkrag bevestig. Jou moeder se offer, die bloedband, is die sterkste skild wat enigiemand jou kon gee."

"Ek verstaan nog steeds nie –"

"Solank die plek waar jou moeder se bloed vloei jou huis is, kan Woldemort jou daar geen leed aandoen nie. Hy het haar bloed ver-spil, maar dit lewe voort in jou en in haar suster. Haar bloed het jou toevlug geword. Jy hoef net een keer per jaar soontoe te gaan, maar solank dit jou tuiste is, is jy veilig. Jou tante weet dit. Ek het dit vir haar verduidelik in die brief wat ek by jou op die trappies gelaat het. Sy weet sy het deur jou in te neem jou waarskynlik die afgelope vyftien jaar aan die lewe gehou."

"Wag," sê Harry. "Wag 'n bietjie."

Hy sit nog regop in sy stoel en staar na Dompeldorius.

"Jy het daardie Skeller gestuur. Jy't vir haar gesê om te onthou – dit was jou stem –"

"Ek het gedink," Dompeldorius laat sak sy kop effens, "dis dalk nodig om haar aan die ooreenkoms te herinner wat gesluit is toe sy jou ingeneem het. Ek het vermoed dat die Dementor-aanval haar moontlik kon bang maak vir die gevare wat jy as surrogaatseun vir hulle inhou."

"Dit het," sê Harry stil. "Wel – meer my oom as vir haar. Hy wou my uitgooi, maar ná die Skeller het sy – het sy gesê ek moet bly." Hy staar 'n rukkie na die vloer. "Maar wat het dit te doen met –"

Hy kan nie Sirius se naam sê nie.

"Vyf jaar gelede," gaan Dompeldorius voort asof sy verhaal nie onderbreek is nie, "het jy by Hogwarts opgedaag. Dalk nie so gelukkig of goedversorg soos ek gehoop het nie, maar springlewendig en gesond. Jy was geen gepamperlangde prins nie, maar so normaal soos ek onder die omstandighede kon hoop. Tot in daardie stadium het my plan redelik goed gewerk.

"En toe . . . wel, jy onthou die gebeure aan die einde van jou eerste jaar by Hogwarts seker net so goed soos ek. Gouer – baie gouer – as wat ek verwag het, was jy van aangesig tot aangesig met Woldemort, maar jy was opgewasse vir die uitdaging. Jy het dit oorleef. En meer as dit: jy het sy herstel na volle krag vertraag. Jy het soos 'n man geseëvier. Ek was . . . baie trots op jou.

"En tog was daar 'n fout in my wonderlike plan. 'n Baie ooglopende fout wat ek geweet het alles kan vernietig. Maar ek het my wysgemaak dat ek sal sorg dat hierdie fout nie alles ruïneer nie, dat ek dit sal verhoed, dat ek net sterk moet wees. En my eerste toets was toe jy daar in die siekeboeg gelê het, uitgeput ná jou worsteling met Woldemort."

"Ek verstaan nie," sê Harry.

"Daar in die siekeboeg het jy my gevra hoekom Woldemort jou as baba wou doodmaak. Onthou jy?"

Harry knik.

"Moes ek toe vir jou gesê het?"

Harry staar woordeloos in die blou oë en sy hart klop al vinniger.

"Sien jy nie die fout in my plan nie? Nee . . . dalk nie. Wel, soos jy weet, het ek besluit om nie vir jou te sê nie. Elf, het ek gedink, is hopeloos te jonk. Ek kon jou nie toe al vertel nie. Die kennis sou te veel wees vir so 'n jong kind.

"Ek moes die gevaartekens toe al gesien het. Ek het mos geweet ek sal jou eendag daardie vreeslike antwoord moet gee. Maar ek was te bly om dit te kan uitstel. So dankbaar vir die verskoning . . . dat jy te jonk is, heeltemal te jonk!

"En so het jou tweede jaar by Hogwarts begin. En weer was daar uitdagings waarvan die meeste volwasse towenaars nie eens kan droom nie. En weer het jy my stoutste verwagtinge oortref. Jy't nie weer gevra hoekom Woldemort daardie merk op jou gelaat het nie, hoewel ons oor jou litteken gepraat het . . .

"Hoekom het ek nie tóé vir jou alles vertel nie?

"Wel, twaalf is nie veel ouer as elf nie. Ek het jou laat wegstap, bloedbevlek, uitgeput, maar ook seëvierend. Enige gedagte dat ek jou dalk moes vertel het, het ek in die kiem gesmoor. Jy was nog so jonk. Ek kon nie jou oomblik van triomf bederf nie . . .

"Sien jy, Harry? Sien jy nou die fout in my briljante plan? Ek het in die strik getrap wat ek vir myself gesê het ek moet vermy."

"Ek verstaan nie –"

"Ek het te veel vir jou omgee," sê Dompeldorius pront. "Ek was meer begaan oor jou geluk as oor die waarheid, meer begaan oor jou gemoedsrus as oor my plan, meer begaan oor jou lewe as oor die lewens wat verlore sou gaan as my plan sou misluk. Ek het presies opgetree soos Woldemort verwag het van 'n dwaas wat te veel van optrede hou.

"Het ek enige verskonings? Net dat ek jou beter dopgehou het as wat jy ooit kan vermoed en dat ek jou verdere leed wou bespaar. Die naamlose en gesiglose mense en diere wat dalk in die vae toekoms hul lewe kon verloor, kon my nie skeel nie. Ek wou hê jy moet lewend, gelukkig en gesond wees en het nooit kon droom dat ek so 'n persoon in my sorg sou hê nie.

"Jou derde jaar het begin. Ek het gesien hoe jy sukkel om te leer om die Dementors af te weer, hoe jy vir Sirius geleer ken en uiteindelik gered het. Moes ek tóé vir jou vertel het, in daardie oomblik van triomf toe jy jou peetpa uit die Ministerie se kloue gered het?

"Maar jy was dertien en my verskonings het al minder geword. Jonk soos jy was, het jy reeds bewys hoe buitengewoon jy is. My gewete het my geen rus gegee nie, Harry. Ek het geweet die oomblik is naby . . .

"En toe kom jy verlede jaar uit die doolhof. Jy het vir Cedric Diggory sien sterf en self ternouernood aan die dood ontkom . . . en hoewel ek geweet het dat Woldemort terug is en dat ek jou moet vertel, kon ek nie. Vannag besef ek ek het te lank stilgebly; jy is lankal gereed vir hierdie verskriklike kennis. Ek het net een verweer: ek wou nie hierdie las, die grootste las van almal, by al jou ander laste voeg nie."

Harry wag, maar Dompeldorius sê niks.

"Ek verstaan nog steeds nie."

"Woldemort het jou as kind probeer doodmaak as gevolg van 'n profesie wat kort voor jou geboorte gemaak is. Hy het nie die presiese woorde van hierdie profesie geken nie en het gedink die oplossing is om jou te vermoor. Hy het sy fout tot sy spyt agtergekom toe die vloek wat jou moes doodmaak op hom teruggekaats het. Sedert sy terugkeer na sy eie liggaam en veral ná jou buitengewone ontsnapping verlede jaar was hy vasberade om die volledige profesie te hoor. Dis die wapen wat hy so naartig sedert sy terugkoms soek: die kennis hoe om jou te vernietig."

Dompeldorius se kantoor is nou gebaai in sonlig. Die glaskas met Godric Griffindor se swaard glim wit en ondeursigtig, die instrumente wat Harry teen die vloer stukkend gegooi het, glinster soos reëndruppels, en agter hulle maak die baba-Fawkes koergeluidjies in sy nes van as.

"Die profesie is vernietig," sê Harry dof. "Ek het vir Neville by die trappe opgetrek in die – in die kamer waar die poort is en toe't sy kleed geskeur en dit het geval –"

"Dit wat gebreek het, dit wat in die Departement vir Geheime gehou was, was bloot die rekord van die profesie. Maar iemand het die profesie gehoor en daardie persoon kan elke woord onthou."

"Wie het dit gehoor?" vra Harry, maar hy dink hy weet.

"Ek het," sê Dompeldorius. "Op 'n koue, nat nag sestien jaar gelede in 'n kamer bo die kroeg van Die Swynenes. Ek is soontoe vir 'n onderhoud met iemand vir die Waarsêery-pos, hoewel ek teësinnig was om met die vak voort te gaan. Die aansoeker was die agteragterkleindogter van 'n baie beroemde en begaafde Siener en ek het uit hoflikheid ingestem om haar te sien. Ek was teleurgesteld. Ek het gedink sy het geen talent nie. Ek het beleef vir haar gesê dat sy nie geskik is vir die pos nie en omgedraai om uit te stap."

Dompeldorius staan op en loop verby Harry na die swart kabinet langs Fawkes se stok. Hy buk, stoot die skuiwer weg en haal die vlak klipbak uit waarin Harry gesien het hoe sy pa vir Snerp tart. Dompeldorius stap terug na sy lessenaar, sit die Peinssif daarop neer, lig sy towerstaf na sy slaap, haal 'n paar fyn silwer gedagte-drade uit en laat val hulle versigtig in die klipbak. Hy gaan sit weer agter sy lessenaar en kyk 'n rukkie daarna. Toe, met 'n suggie, lig hy sy towerstaf en gee die silwer drade 'n ligte tikkie.

'n Figuur verrys daaruit, toegewikkel in sjaals, haar oë abnormaal groot agter haar brilglase. Sy warrel stadig in die lug, haar voete geanker in die bak. Maar toe sy praat, is dit nie Sybill Trelawney se gewone eteriese, mistieke stem nie, maar die skel, skor stem wat Harry al een keer gehoor het:

"Die een met die mag om die Donker Heer te oorwin, is aan die kom . . . gebore aan hulle wat hom drie keer getrotseer het, gebore wanneer die sewende maand sterf . . . en die Donker Heer sal hom as 'n gelyke merk, maar hy sal magte hê wat die Donker Heer nie ken nie . . . en een van hulle moet sterf aan die hand van die ander een, want albei kan nie bly leef nie . . . die een met die mag om die Donker Heer te oorwin, sal gebore word wanneer die sewende maand sterf . . ."

Professor Trelawney sink stadig terug in die silwer massa en verdwyn.

Die stilte in die kantoor is volkome. Nóg Dompeldorius, nóg Harry, nóg enige van die portrette maak 'n geluid. Selfs Fawkes is doodstil.

"Professor Dompeldorius?" sê Harry saggies, want Dompeldorius staar nog steeds ingedagte na die Peinssif. "Dit . . . beteken dit . . . wat beteken dit?"

"Dit beteken," sê Dompeldorius, "dat die enigste persoon wat die heer Woldemort vir ewig en altyd kan oorwin sestien jaar gelede aan die einde van Julie gebore is. Hierdie seun se ouers het vir Woldemort drie keer getrotseer."

Dit voel vir Harry asof iets hom toevou. Hy haal weer swaar asem.

"Dit beteken – ek?"

Dompeldorius kyk na hom deur sy bril.

"Die vreemde ding is, Harry," sê hy sag, "dit was dalk nie eens jy nie. Sybill se profesie was op twee towenaarseuns van toepassing. Albei is daardie jaar aan die einde van Julie gebore en albei se ouers was in die Orde van die Feniks en het Woldemort drie keer ternouernood ontwyk. Die een was natuurlik jy. Die ander een was Neville Loggerenberg."

"Maar dan . . . maar dan . . . hoekom is my naam op die profesie en nie Neville s'n nie?"

"Ná Woldemort se aanval op jou is die amptelike rekord verander," sê Dompeldorius. "Die bewaker van die Saal van Profesieë was toe oortuig dat Sibyll se profesie na jou verwys."

"Maar sê nou dit was nie ek nie?" sê Harry.

"Ek is bevrees," sê Dompeldorius stadig en dit lyk of hy die woorde met groot moeite uitspreek, "daar is geen twyfel dat dit jy is nie."

"Maar – maar Neville is ook aan die einde van Julie gebore – en sy ma en pa –"

"Jy vergeet die einde van die profesie, die finale manier waaraan die seun wat vir Woldemort kan oorwin, uitgeken sal word . . ."

Woldemort sal hom self as 'n gelyke merk. En hy het, Harry. Hy het jou daardie merk gegee wat 'n vloek sowel 'n seën is."

"Maar wat as hy verkeerd gekies het? Wat as hy die verkeerde persoon gemerk het?"

"Hy het die seun gekies wat hy gedink het die grootste gevaar vir hom inhou. Maar let hierop, Harry, dit was nie die volbloed (die enigste soort towenaar wat volgens sy oortuigings iets werd is) wat sy aandag getrek het nie, maar die halfbloed soos hyself. Hy het met jou geïdentifiseer nog voor hy jou ooit gesien het. En toe hy jou met daardie luttel merk, het hy jou nie doodgemaak soos hy beplan het nie, maar vir jou magte gegee wat veroorsaak het dat jy reeds vier keer van hom ontsnap het – iets wat nóg jou ouers nóg Neville s'n kon regkry."

"Hoekom het hy dit dan gedoen?" Harry voel koud en amper sonder gevoel. "Hoekom wou hy my doodmaak toe ek 'n baba was? Hoekom het hy nie gewag tot ons ouer is om te sien wie die gevaarlikste is nie, ek of Neville, en toe daardie een probeer dood-?"

"Dit sou seker die mees praktiese oplossing gewees het," sê Dompeldorius, "maar sy inligting oor die profesie was onvolledig. Sybill het Die Swynenes gekies omdat dit goedkoop is, maar dit het 'n baie . . . sal ons sê . . . interessanter klandisie as die Drie Besemstokke. Soos jy en jou vriende tot julle nadeel uitgevind het, en ek daardie nag tot myne, is dit 'n plek waar jy nooit weet wie jou hoor nie. Natuurlik het ek nie daardie nag kon droom dat Sybill Trelawney iets merkwaardigs sou sien nie. My – ons – geluk was dat die luistervink kort ná die begin van die profesie betrap en uit die herberg gesmyt is."

"Dan het hy net –?"

"Hy het net die begin gehoor, die gedeelte oor die geboorte van 'n seun in die maand Julie vir ouers wat Woldemort reeds drie keer gefnuik het. Hy kon dus nie sy meester waarsku dat hy die risiko loop om die seun as sy gelyke te merk en sekere magte aan hom oor te dra as hy hom sou aanval nie, en dat dit wys sou wees om eers te wag en meer uit te vind. Woldemort het nie geweet hoeveel gevaar hierdie aanval vir hom inhou nie. Hy het nie geweet jy gaan magte hê wat die Donker Heer nie ken nie."

"Maar ek het nie!" sê Harry in 'n gewurgde stem. "Ek het geen magte wat hy nie het nie. Ek kan nie veg soos hy vannag geveg het nie. Ek kan nie van mense besit neem of – of hulle doodmaak nie –"

"Daar is 'n kamer in die Departement vir Geheime," val Dompeldorius hom in die rede, "wat ten alle tye gesluit bly. Daarin is 'n mag wat groter en wonderliker is as die dood en as menslike

intellek en as alle natuurmagte. Dis die mees geheimsinnige van al die magte wat tans bestudeer word. Jy besit 'n oormaat daarvan, maar Woldemort het niks. Daardie mag het veroorsaak dat jy laas nag vir Sirius wou red. Daardie mag het gekeer dat Woldemort jou volledig besit, want hy kan nie 'n liggaam verduur wat so deurtrek is met dié krag wat hy so minag nie. Op die ou end was dit nie jou vermoë om jou verstand te sluit wat jou gered het nie, Harry, dit was jou hart."

Harry maak sy oë toe. As hy nie vir Sirius probeer red het nie, was Sirius nie vandag dood nie . . . Meer om die oomblik uit te stel dat hy weer oor Sirius moet dink en nie omdat hy regtig wil weet nie, vra hy: "Die einde van die profesie . . . dit was iets oor nie een kan bly lewe . . ."

" . . . een van hulle moet sterf aan die hand van die ander een, want albei kan nie bly leef nie," sê Dompeldorius.

"Ja," sê Harry, en dis of hy die woord uit 'n diep put van wanhoop boontoe sleep. "Dan beteken dit . . . dat een van ons die ander een moet doodmaak . . . op die ou end?"

"Ja," sê Dompeldorius.

Vir 'n lang ruk is albei stil. Iewers anderkant die kantoormure hoor Harry die geluid van stemme, dalk studente op pad ondertoe vir 'n vroeë ontbyt. Dit voel onmoontlik dat daar mense in die wêreld kan wees wat nog wil eet, nog lag, wat nie omgee of weet dat Sirius Swardt vir altyd weg is nie. Sirius voel reeds 'n miljoen kilometer ver, terwyl 'n deel van Harry steeds glo dat hy net die sluier moet wegtrek om vir Sirius te sien, hom te groet, sy blaflag te hoor . . .

"Ek voel ek is jou nog 'n verduideliking verskuldig, Harry," sê Dompeldorius aarselend. "Jy het dalk gewonder hoekom ek jou nie as prefek gekies het nie? Ek moet erken . . . ek het gereken . . . dat jy onder die omstandighede reeds genoeg verantwoordelikhede het."

Harry kyk op en sien hoe 'n traan oor Dompeldorius se wang tot in sy lang silwer baard afloop.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



THE SECOND WAR BEGINS

HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED RETURNS

In a brief statement Friday night, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge confirmed that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned to this country and is active once more.

“It is with great regret that I must confirm that the wizard styling himself Lord — well, you know who I mean — is alive and among us again,” said Fudge, looking tired and flustered as he addressed reporters. “It is with almost equal regret that we report the mass revolt of the dementors of Azkaban, who have shown themselves averse to continuing in the Ministry’s employ.

We believe that the dementors are currently taking direction from Lord — Thingy.

“We urge the magical population to remain vigilant. The Ministry is currently publishing guides to elementary home and personal defense that will be delivered free to all Wizarding homes within the coming month.”

The Minister’s statement was met with dismay and alarm from the Wizarding community, which as recently as last Wednesday was receiving Ministry assurances that there was “no truth whatsoever in these persistent rumors that You-Know-Who is operating amongst us once more.”

Details of the events that led to the Ministry turnaround are still hazy, though it is believed that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and a select band of followers (known as Death Eaters) gained entry to the Ministry of Magic itself on Thursday evening.

Albus Dumbledore, newly reinstated headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, reinstated member of the International Confederation of Wizards, and reinstated Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, was unavailable for comment last night. He has insisted for a year that You-Know-Who was not dead, as was widely hoped and believed, but recruiting followers once more for a fresh attempt to seize power. Meanwhile the Boy Who Lived —

“There you are, Harry, I knew they’d drag you into it somehow,” said Hermione, looking over the top of the paper at him.

They were in the hospital wing. Harry was sitting on the end of Ron's bed and they were both listening to Hermione read the front page of the *Sunday Prophet*. Ginny, whose ankle had been mended in a trice by Madam Pomfrey, was curled up at the foot of Hermione's bed; Neville, whose nose had likewise been returned to its normal size and shape, was in a chair between the two beds; and Luna, who had dropped in to visit clutching the latest edition of *The Quibbler*, was reading the magazine upside down and apparently not taking in a word Hermione was saying.

"He's 'the Boy Who Lived' again now, though, isn't he?" said Ron darkly. "Not such a show-off maniac anymore, eh?"

He helped himself to a handful of Chocolate Frogs from the immense pile on his bedside cabinet, threw a few to Harry, Ginny, and Neville, and ripped off the wrapper of his own with his teeth. There were still deep welts on his forearms where the brain's tentacles had wrapped around him. According to Madam Pomfrey, thoughts could leave deeper scarring than almost anything else, though since she had started applying copious amounts of Dr. Ubbly's Oblivious Unction, there seemed to be some improvement.

"Yes, they're very complimentary about you now, Harry," said Hermione, now scanning down the article. "'*A lone voice of truth . . . perceived as unbalanced, yet never wavered in his story . . . forced to bear ridicule and slander . . .*' Hmmm," said Hermione, frowning. "I notice they don't mention the fact that it was them doing all the ridiculing and slandering, though. . . ."

She winced slightly and put a hand to her ribs. The curse Dolohov had used on her, though less effective than it would have been had he

been able to say the incantation aloud, had nevertheless caused, in Madam Pomfrey's words, "quite enough damage to be going on with." Hermione was having to take ten different types of potion every day and although she was improving greatly, was already bored with the hospital wing.

"*'You-Know-Who's Last Attempt to Take Over, pages two to four, What the Ministry Should Have Told Us, page five, Why Nobody Listened to Albus Dumbledore, pages six to eight, Exclusive Interview with Harry Potter, page nine . . .'* Well," said Hermione, folding up the newspaper and throwing it aside, "it's certainly given them lots to write about. And that interview with Harry isn't exclusive, it's the one that was in *The Quibbler* months ago . . ."

"Daddy sold it to them," said Luna vaguely, turning a page of *The Quibbler*. "He got a very good price for it too, so we're going to go on an expedition to Sweden this summer and see if we can catch a Crumple-Horned Snorkack."

Hermione seemed to struggle with herself for a moment, then said, "That sounds lovely."

Ginny caught Harry's eye and looked away quickly, grinning.

"So anyway," said Hermione, sitting up a little straighter and wincing again, "what's going on in school?"

"Well, Flitwick's got rid of Fred and George's swamp," said Ginny. "He did it in about three seconds. But he left a tiny patch under the window and he's roped it off —"

"Why?" said Hermione, looking startled.

"Oh, he just says it was a really good bit of magic," said Ginny, shrugging.

"I think he left it as a monument to Fred and George," said Ron through a mouthful of chocolate. "They sent me all these, you know," he told Harry, pointing at the small mountain of Frogs beside him. "Must be doing all right out of that joke shop, eh?"

Hermione looked rather disapproving and asked, "So has all the trouble stopped now Dumbledore's back?"

"Yes," said Neville, "everything's settled right back down again."

"I s'pose Filch is happy, is he?" asked Ron, propping a Chocolate Frog card featuring Dumbledore against his water jug.

"Not at all," said Ginny. "He's really, really miserable, actually..." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "He keeps saying Umbridge was the best thing that ever happened to Hogwarts..."

All six of them looked around. Professor Umbridge was lying in a bed opposite them, gazing up at the ceiling. Dumbledore had strode alone into the forest to rescue her from the centaurs. How he had done it — how he had emerged from the trees supporting Professor Umbridge without so much as a scratch on him — nobody knew, and Umbridge was certainly not telling. Since she had returned to the castle she had not, as far as any of them knew, uttered a single word. Nobody really knew what was wrong with her either. Her usually neat mousy hair was very untidy and there were bits of twig and leaf in it, but otherwise she seemed to be quite unscathed.

"Madam Pomfrey says she's just in shock," whispered Hermione.

"Sulking, more like," said Ginny.

"Yeah, she shows signs of life if you do this," said Ron, and with his tongue he made soft clip-clopping noises. Umbridge sat bolt upright, looking wildly around.

“Anything wrong, Professor?” called Madam Pomfrey, poking her head around her office door.

“No . . . no . . .” said Umbridge, sinking back into her pillows. “no, I must have been dreaming . . .”

Hermione and Ginny muffled their laughter in the bedclothes.

“Speaking of centaurs,” said Hermione, when she had recovered a little, “who’s Divination teacher now? Is Firenze staying?”

“He’s got to,” said Harry, “the other centaurs won’t take him back, will they?”

“It looks like he and Trelawney are both going to teach,” said Ginny.

“Bet Dumbledore wishes he could’ve got rid of Trelawney for good,” said Ron, now munching on his fourteenth Frog. “Mind you, the whole subject’s useless if you ask me, Firenze isn’t a lot better . . .”

“How can you say that?” Hermione demanded. “After we’ve just found out that there are real prophecies?”

Harry’s heart began to race. He had not told Ron, Hermione, or anyone else what the prophecy had contained. Neville had told them it had smashed while Harry was pulling him up the steps in the Death Room, and Harry had not yet corrected this impression. He was not ready to see their expressions when he told them that he must be either murderer or victim, there was no other way . . .

“It is a pity it broke,” said Hermione quietly, shaking her head.

“Yeah, it is,” said Ron. “Still, at least You-Know-Who never found out what was in it either — where are you going?” he added, looking both surprised and disappointed as Harry stood up.

“Er — Hagrid’s,” said Harry. “You know, he just got back and I promised I’d go down and see him and tell him how you two are . . .”

“Oh all right then,” said Ron grumpily, looking out of the dormitory window at the patch of bright blue sky beyond. “Wish we could come . . .”

“Say hello to him for us!” called Hermione, as Harry proceeded down the ward. “And ask him what’s happening about . . . about his little friend!”

Harry gave a wave of his hand to show he had heard and understood as he left the dormitory.

The castle seemed very quiet even for a Sunday. Everybody was clearly out in the sunny grounds, enjoying the end of their exams and the prospect of a last few days of term unhampered by studying or homework. Harry walked slowly along the deserted corridor, peering out of windows as he went. He could see people messing around in the air over the Quidditch pitch and a couple of students swimming in the lake, accompanied by the giant squid.

He was finding it hard at the moment to decide whether he wanted to be with people or not. Whenever he was in company he wanted to get away, and whenever he was alone he wanted company. He thought he might really go and visit Hagrid, though; he had not talked to him properly since he had returned. . . .

Harry had just descended the last marble step into the entrance hall when Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle emerged from a door on the right that Harry knew led down to the Slytherin common room. Harry stopped dead; so did Malfoy and the others. For a few moments, the only sounds were the shouts, laughter, and splashes drifting into the

hall from the grounds through the open front doors.

Malfoy glanced around. Harry knew he was checking for signs of teachers. Then he looked back at Harry and said in a low voice, “You’re dead, Potter.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Funny,” he said, “you’d think I’d have stopped walking around . . .”

Malfoy looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him. He felt a kind of detached satisfaction at the sight of his pale, pointed face contorted with rage.

“You’re going to pay,” said Malfoy in a voice barely louder than a whisper. “*I’m* going to make you pay for what you’ve done to my father . . .”

“Well, I’m terrified now,” said Harry sarcastically. “I s’pose Lord Voldemort’s just a warm-up act compared to you three — what’s the matter?” he said, for Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had all looked stricken at the sound of the name. “He’s your dad’s mate, isn’t he? Not scared of him, are you?”

“You think you’re such a big man, Potter,” said Malfoy, advancing now, Crabbe and Goyle flanking him. “You wait. I’ll have you. You can’t land my father in prison —”

“I thought I just had,” said Harry.

“The dementors have left Azkaban,” said Malfoy quietly. “Dad and the others’ll be out in no time . . .”

“Yeah, I expect they will,” said Harry. “Still, at least everyone knows what scumbags they are now —”

Malfoy’s hand flew toward his wand, but Harry was too quick for him. He had drawn his own wand before Malfoy’s fingers had even

entered the pocket of his robes.

“Potter!”

The voice rang across the entrance hall; Snape had emerged from the staircase leading down to his office, and at the sight of him Harry felt a great rush of hatred beyond anything he felt toward Malfoy. Whatever Dumbledore said, he would never forgive Snape never . . .

“What are you doing, Potter?” said Snape coldly as ever, as he strode over to the four of them.

“I’m trying to decide what curse to use on Malfoy, sir,” said Harry fiercely.

Snape stared at him.

“Put that wand away at once,” he said curtly. “Ten points from Gryff—”

Snape looked toward the giant hourglasses on the walls and gave a sneering smile.

“Ah. I see there are no longer any points left in the Gryffindor hourglass to take away. In that case, Potter, we will simply have to —”

“Add some more?”

Professor McGonagall had just stumped up the stone steps into the castle. She was carrying a tartan carpetbag in one hand and leaning heavily on a walking stick with her other, but otherwise looked quite well.

“Professor McGonagall!” said Snape, striding forward. “Out of St. Mungo’s, I see!”

“Yes, Professor Snape,” said Professor McGonagall, shrugging off

her traveling cloak. "I'm quite as good as new. You two — Crabbe — Goyle —"

She beckoned them forward imperiously and they came, shuffling their large feet and looking awkward.

"Here," said Professor McGonagall, thrusting her carpetbag into Crabbe's chest and her cloak into Goyle's, "take these up to my office for me."

They turned and stumped away up the marble staircase.

"Right then," said Professor McGonagall, looking up at the hourglasses on the wall, "well, I think Potter and his friends ought to have fifty points apiece for alerting the world to the return of You-Know-Who! What say you, Professor Snape?"

"What?" snapped Snape, though Harry knew he had heard perfectly well. "Oh — well — I suppose . . ."

"So that's fifty each for Potter, the two Weasleys, Longbottom, and Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall, and a shower of rubies fell down into the bottom bulb of Gryffindor's hourglass as she spoke. "Oh — and fifty for Miss Lovegood, I suppose," she added, and a number of sapphires fell into Ravenclaw's glass. "Now, you wanted to take ten from Mr. Potter, I think, Professor Snape — so there we are . . ."

A few rubies retreated into the upper bulb, leaving a respectable amount below nevertheless.

"Well, Potter, Malfoy, I think you ought to be outside on a glorious day like this," Professor McGonagall continued briskly.

Harry did not need telling twice. He thrust his wand back inside his robes and headed straight for the front doors without another

glance at Snape and Malfoy.

The hot sun hit him with a blast as he walked across the lawns toward Hagrid's cabin. Students lying around on the grass sunbathing, talking, reading the *Sunday Prophet*, and eating sweets looked up at him as he passed. Some called out to him, or else waved, clearly eager to show that they, like the *Prophet*, had decided he was something of a hero. Harry said nothing to any of them. He had no idea how much they knew of what had happened three days ago, but he had so far avoided being questioned and preferred it that way.

He thought at first when he knocked on Hagrid's cabin door that he was out, but then Fang came charging around the corner and almost bowled him over with the enthusiasm of his welcome. Hagrid, it transpired, was picking runner beans in his back garden.

"All righ', Harry!" he said, beaming, when Harry approached the fence. "Come in, come in, we'll have a cup o' dandelion juice.

"How's things?" Hagrid asked him, as they settled down at his wooden table with a glass apiece of iced juice. "You — er — feelin' all righ', are yeh?"

Harry knew from the look of concern on Hagrid's face that he was not referring to Harry's physical well-being.

"I'm fine," Harry said quickly, because he could not bear to discuss the thing that he knew was in Hagrid's mind. "So, where've you been?"

"Bin hidin' out in the mountains," said Hagrid. "Up in a cave, like Sirius did when he —"

Hagrid broke off, cleared his throat gruffly, looked at Harry, and took a long draught of juice.

“Anyway, back now,” he said feebly.

“You — you look better,” said Harry, who was determined to keep the conversation moving away from Sirius.

“Wha’?” said Hagrid, raising a massive hand and feeling his face. “Oh — oh yeah. Well, Grawpy’s loads better behaved now, loads. Seemed right pleased ter see me when I got back, ter tell yeh the truth. He’s a good lad, really. . . . I’ve bin thinkin’ abou’ tryin’ ter find him a lady friend, actually . . .”

Harry would normally have tried to persuade Hagrid out of this idea at once. The prospect of a second giant taking up residence in the forest, possibly even wilder and more brutal than Grawp, was positively alarming, but somehow Harry could not muster the energy necessary to argue the point. He was starting to wish he was alone again, and with the idea of hastening his departure he took several large gulps of his dandelion juice, half-emptying his glass.

“Ev’ryone knows you’ve bin tellin’ the truth now, Harry,” said Hagrid softly and unexpectedly. “Tha’s gotta be better, hasn’ it?”

Harry shrugged.

“Look . . .” Hagrid leaned toward him across the table, “I knew Sirius longer ’n you did. . . . He died in battle, an’ tha’s the way he’d’ve wanted ter go —”

“He didn’t want to go at all!” said Harry angrily.

Hagrid bowed his great shaggy head.

“Nah, I don’ reckon he did,” he said quietly. “But still, Harry, he was never one ter sit around at home an’ let other people do the fightin’. He couldn’ have lived with himself if he hadn’ gone ter help —”

Harry leapt up again.

"I've got to go and visit Ron and Hermione in the hospital wing," he said mechanically.

"Oh," said Hagrid, looking rather upset. "Oh . . . all righ' then, Harry . . . Take care of yerself then, an' drop back in if yeh've got a mo . . ."

"Yeah . . . right . . ."

Harry crossed to the door as fast as he could and pulled it open. He was out in the sunshine again before Hagrid had finished saying good-bye and walked away across the lawn. Once again, people called out to him as he passed. He closed his eyes for a few moments, wishing they would all vanish, that he could open his eyes and find himself alone in the grounds. . . .

A few days ago, before his exams had finished and he had seen the vision Voldemort had planted in his mind, he would have given almost anything for the Wizarding world to know that he had been telling the truth, for them to believe that Voldemort was back and know that he was neither a liar nor mad. Now, however . . .

He walked a short way around the lake, sat down on its bank, sheltered from the gaze of passersby behind a tangle of shrubs, and stared out over the gleaming water, thinking. . . .

Perhaps the reason he wanted to be alone was because he had felt isolated from everybody since his talk with Dumbledore. An invisible barrier separated him from the rest of the world. He was — he had always been — a marked man. It was just that he had never really understood what that meant. . . .

And yet sitting here on the edge of the lake, with the terrible

weight of grief dragging at him, with the loss of Sirius so raw and fresh inside, he could not muster any great sense of fear. It was sunny and the grounds around him were full of laughing people, and even though he felt as distant from them as though he belonged to a different race, it was still very hard to believe as he sat here that his life must include, or end in, murder. . . .

He sat there for a long time, gazing out at the water, trying not to think about his godfather or to remember that it was directly across from here, on the opposite bank, that Sirius had collapsed trying to fend off a hundred dementors. . . .

The sun had fallen before he realized that he was cold. He got up and returned to the castle, wiping his face on his sleeve as he went.

Ron and Hermione left the hospital wing completely cured three days before the end of term. Hermione showed signs of wanting to talk about Sirius, but Ron tended to make hushing noises every time she mentioned his name. Harry was not sure whether or not he wanted to talk about his godfather yet; his wishes varied with his mood. He knew one thing, though: Unhappy as he felt at the moment, he would greatly miss Hogwarts in a few days' time when he was back at number four, Privet Drive. Even though he now understood exactly why he had to return there every summer, he did not feel any better about it. Indeed, he had never dreaded his return more.

Professor Umbridge left Hogwarts the day before the end of term. It seemed that she had crept out of the hospital wing during dinnertime, evidently hoping to depart undetected, but unfortunately for her, she met Peeves on the way, who seized his last chance to do

as Fred had instructed and chased her gleefully from the premises, whacking her alternately with a walking stick and a sock full of chalk. Many students ran out into the entrance hall to watch her running away down the path, and the Heads of Houses tried only halfheartedly to restrain their pupils. Indeed, Professor McGonagall sank back into her chair at the staff table after a few feeble remonstrances and was clearly heard to express a regret that she could not run cheering after Umbridge herself, because Peeves had borrowed her walking stick.

Their last evening at school arrived; most people had finished packing and were already heading down to the end-of-term feast, but Harry had not even started.

“Just do it tomorrow!” said Ron, who was waiting by the door of their dormitory. “Come on, I’m starving . . .”

“I won’t be long. . . . Look, you go ahead . . .”

But when the dormitory door closed behind Ron, Harry made no effort to speed up his packing. The very last thing he wanted to do was to attend the end-of-term feast. He was worried that Dumbledore would make some reference to him in his speech. He was sure to mention Voldemort’s return; he had talked to them about it last year, after all. . . .

Harry pulled some crumpled robes out of the very bottom of his trunk to make way for folded ones and, as he did so, noticed a badly wrapped package lying in a corner of it. He could not think what it was doing there. He bent down, pulled it out from underneath his trainers, and examined it.

He realized what it was within seconds. Sirius had given it to him

just inside the front door of twelve Grimmauld Place. *Use it if you need me, all right?*

Harry sank down onto his bed and unwrapped the package. Out fell a small, square mirror. It looked old; it was certainly dirty. Harry held it up to his face and saw his own reflection looking back at him.

He turned the mirror over. There on the reverse side was a scribbled note from Sirius.

This is a two-way mirror. I've got the other. If you need to speak to me, just say my name into it; you'll appear in my mirror and I'll be able to talk in yours. James and I used to use them when we were in separate detentions.

And Harry's heart began to race. He remembered seeing his dead parents in the Mirror of Erised four years ago. He was going to be able to talk to Sirius again, right now, he knew it —

He looked around to make sure there was nobody else there; the dormitory was quite empty. He looked back at the mirror, raised it in front of his face with trembling hands, and said, loudly and clearly, "Sirius."

His breath misted the surface of the glass. He held the mirror even closer, excitement flooding through him, but the eyes blinking back at him through the fog were definitely his own.

He wiped the mirror clear again and said, so that every syllable rang clearly through the room, "Sirius Black!"

Nothing happened. The frustrated face looking back out of the mirror was still, definitely, his own.

Sirius didn't have his mirror on him when he went through the

archway, said a small voice in Harry's head. *That's why it's not working. . . .*

Harry remained quite still for a moment, then hurled the mirror back into the trunk where it shattered. He had been convinced, for a whole, shining minute, that he was going to see Sirius, talk to him again. . . .

Disappointment was burning in his throat. He got up and began throwing his things pell-mell into the trunk on top of the broken mirror —

But then an idea struck him. . . . A better idea than a mirror. . . . A much bigger, more important idea. . . . How had he never thought of it before — why had he never asked?

He was sprinting out of the dormitory and down the spiral staircase, hitting the walls as he ran and barely noticing. He hurtled across the empty common room, through the portrait hole and off along the corridor, ignoring the Fat Lady, who called after him, "The feast is about to start, you know, you're cutting it very fine!"

But Harry had no intention of going to the feast. . . .

How could it be that the place was full of ghosts whenever you didn't need one, yet now . . .

He ran down staircases and along corridors and met nobody either alive or dead. They were all, clearly, in the Great Hall. Outside his Charms classroom he came to a halt, panting and thinking disconsolately that he would have to wait until later, until after the end of the feast. . . .

But just as he had given up hope he saw it — a translucent somebody drifting across the end of the corridor.

“Hey — hey Nick! NICK!”

The ghost stuck its head back out of the wall, revealing the extravagantly plumed hat and dangerously wobbling head of Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington.

“Good evening,” he said, withdrawing the rest of his body from the solid stone and smiling at Harry. “I am not the only one who is late, then? Though,” he sighed, “in rather different senses, of course . . .”

“Nick, can I ask you something?”

A most peculiar expression stole over Nearly Headless Nick’s face as he inserted a finger in the stiff ruff at his neck and tugged it a little straighter, apparently to give himself thinking time. He desisted only when his partially severed neck seemed about to give way completely.

“Er — now, Harry?” said Nick, looking discomforted. “Can’t it wait until after the feast?”

“No — Nick — please,” said Harry, “I really need to talk to you. Can we go in here?”

Harry opened the door of the nearest classroom and Nearly Headless Nick sighed.

“Oh very well,” he said, looking resigned. “I can’t pretend I haven’t been expecting it.”

Harry was holding the door open for him, but he drifted through the wall instead.

“Expecting what?” Harry asked, as he closed the door.

“You to come and find me,” said Nick, now gliding over to the window and looking out at the darkening grounds. “It happens,

sometimes . . . when somebody has suffered a . . . loss.”

“Well,” said Harry, refusing to be deflected. “You were right, I’ve — I’ve come to find you.”

Nick said nothing.

“It’s —” said Harry, who was finding this more awkward than he had anticipated, “it’s just — you’re dead. But you’re still here, aren’t you?”

Nick sighed and continued to gaze out at the grounds.

“That’s right, isn’t it?” Harry urged him. “You died, but I’m talking to you. . . . You can walk around Hogwarts and everything, can’t you?”

“Yes,” said Nearly Headless Nick quietly, “I walk and talk, yes.”

“So, you came back, didn’t you?” said Harry urgently. “People can come back, right? As ghosts. They don’t have to disappear completely. *Well?*” he added impatiently, when Nick continued to say nothing.

Nearly Headless Nick hesitated, then said, “Not everyone can come back as a ghost.”

“What d’you mean?” said Harry quickly.

“Only . . . only wizards.”

“Oh,” said Harry, and he almost laughed with relief. “Well, that’s okay then, the person I’m asking about is a wizard. So he can come back, right?”

Nick turned away from the window and looked mournfully at Harry. “He won’t come back.”

“Who?”

“Sirius Black,” said Nick.

“But you did!” said Harry angrily. “You came back — you’re dead and you didn’t disappear —”

“Wizards can leave an imprint of themselves upon the earth, to walk palely where their living selves once trod,” said Nick miserably. “But very few wizards choose that path.”

“Why not?” said Harry. “Anyway — it doesn’t matter — Sirius won’t care if it’s unusual, he’ll come back, I know he will!”

And so strong was his belief that Harry actually turned his head to check the door, sure, for a split second, that he was going to see Sirius, pearly white and transparent but beaming, walking through it toward him.

“He will not come back,” repeated Nick quietly. “He will have gone on.”

“What d’you mean, ‘gone on’?” said Harry quickly. “Gone on where? Listen — what happens when you die, anyway? Where do you go? Why doesn’t everyone come back? Why isn’t this place full of ghosts? Why — ?”

“I cannot answer,” said Nick.

“You’re dead, aren’t you?” said Harry exasperatedly. “Who can answer better than you?”

“I was afraid of death,” said Nick. “I chose to remain behind. I sometimes wonder whether I oughtn’t to have . . . Well, that is neither here nor there. . . . In fact, *I* am neither here nor there . . .” He gave a small sad chuckle. “I know nothing of the secrets of death, Harry, for I chose my feeble imitation of life instead. I believe learned wizards study the matter in the Department of Mysteries —”

“Don’t talk to me about that place!” said Harry fiercely.

“I am sorry not to have been more help,” said Nick gently.

“Well . . . well, do excuse me . . . the feast, you know . . .”

And he left the room, leaving Harry there alone, gazing blankly at the wall through which Nick had disappeared.

Harry felt almost as though he had lost his godfather all over again in losing the hope that he might be able to see or speak to him once more. He walked slowly and miserably back up through the empty castle, wondering whether he would ever feel cheerful again.

He had turned the corner toward the Fat Lady’s corridor when he saw somebody up ahead fastening a note to a board on the wall. A second glance showed him that it was Luna. There were no good hiding places nearby, she was bound to have heard his footsteps, and in any case, Harry could hardly muster the energy to avoid anyone at the moment.

“Hello,” said Luna vaguely, glancing around at him as she stepped back from the notice.

“How come you’re not at the feast?” Harry asked.

“Well, I’ve lost most of my possessions,” said Luna serenely. “People take them and hide them, you know. But as it’s the last night, I really do need them back, so I’ve been putting up signs.”

She gestured toward the notice board, upon which, sure enough, she had pinned a list of all her missing books and clothes, with a plea for their return.

An odd feeling rose in Harry — an emotion quite different from the anger and grief that had filled him since Sirius’s death. It was a few moments before he realized that he was feeling sorry for Luna.

"How come people hide your stuff?" he asked her, frowning.

"Oh . . . well . . ." She shrugged. "I think they think I'm a bit odd, you know. Some people call me 'Loony' Lovegood, actually."

Harry looked at her and the new feeling of pity intensified rather painfully.

"That's no reason for them to take your things," he said flatly. "D'you want help finding them?"

"Oh no," she said, smiling at him. "They'll come back, they always do in the end. It was just that I wanted to pack tonight. Anyway . . . why aren't *you* at the feast?"

Harry shrugged. "Just didn't feel like it."

"No," said Luna, observing him with those oddly misty, protuberant eyes. "I don't suppose you do. That man the Death Eaters killed was your godfather, wasn't he? Ginny told me."

Harry nodded curtly, but found that for some reason he did not mind Luna talking about Sirius. He had just remembered that she too could see thestrals.

"Have you . . ." he began. "I mean, who . . . has anyone you've known ever died?"

"Yes," said Luna simply, "my mother. She was a quite extraordinary witch, you know, but she did like to experiment and one of her spells went rather badly wrong one day. I was nine."

"I'm sorry," Harry mumbled.

"Yes, it was rather horrible," said Luna conversationally. "I still feel very sad about it sometimes. But I've still got Dad. And anyway, it's not as though I'll never see Mum again, is it?"

"Er — isn't it?" said Harry uncertainly.

She shook her head in disbelief. “Oh, come on. You heard them, just behind the veil, didn’t you?”

“You mean . . .”

“In that room with the archway. They were just lurking out of sight, that’s all. You heard them.”

They looked at each other. Luna was smiling slightly. Harry did not know what to say, or to think. Luna believed so many extraordinary things . . . yet he had been sure he had heard voices behind the veil too.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to help you look for your stuff?” he said.

“Oh no,” said Luna. “No, I think I’ll just go down and have some pudding and wait for it all to turn up. . . . It always does in the end. . . . Well, have a nice holiday, Harry.”

“Yeah . . . yeah, you too.”

She walked away from him, and as he watched her go, he found that the terrible weight in his stomach seemed to have lessened slightly.

The journey home on the Hogwarts Express next day was eventful in several ways. Firstly, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who had clearly been waiting all week for the opportunity to strike without teacher witnesses, attempted to ambush Harry halfway down the train as he made his way back from the toilet. The attack might have succeeded had it not been for the fact that they unwittingly chose to stage the attack right outside a compartment full of D.A. members, who saw what was happening through the glass and rose as one to rush to

Harry's aid. By the time Ernie Macmillan, Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Anthony Goldstein, and Terry Boot had finished using a wide variety of the hexes and jinxes Harry had taught them, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle resembled nothing so much as three gigantic slugs squeezed into Hogwarts uniforms as Harry, Ernie, and Justin hoisted them into the luggage rack and left them there to ooze.

"I must say, I'm looking forward to seeing Malfoy's mother's face when he gets off the train," said Ernie with some satisfaction, as he watched Malfoy squirm above him. Ernie had never quite got over the indignity of Malfoy docking points from Hufflepuff during his brief spell as a member of the Inquisitorial Squad.

"Goyle's mum'll be really pleased, though," said Ron, who had come to investigate the source of the commotion. "He's loads better-looking now. . . . Anyway, Harry, the food trolley's just stopped if you want anything. . . ."

Harry thanked the others and accompanied Ron back to their compartment, where he bought a large pile of Cauldron Cakes and Pumpkin Pasties. Hermione was reading the *Daily Prophet* again, Ginny was doing a quiz in *The Quibbler*, and Neville was stroking his *Mimulus mimbletonia*, which had grown a great deal over the year and now made odd crooning noises when touched.

Harry and Ron whiled away most of the journey playing wizard chess while Hermione read out snippets from the *Prophet*. It was now full of articles about how to repel dementors, attempts by the Ministry to track down Death Eaters, and hysterical letters claiming that the writer had seen Lord Voldemort walking past their house that

very morning. . . .

“It hasn’t really started yet,” sighed Hermione gloomily, folding up the newspaper again. “But it won’t be long now . . .”

“Hey, Harry,” said Ron, nodding toward the glass window onto the corridor.

Harry looked around. Cho was passing, accompanied by Marietta Edgecombe, who was wearing a balaclava. His and Cho’s eyes met for a moment. Cho blushed and kept walking. Harry looked back down at the chessboard just in time to see one of his pawns chased off its square by Ron’s knight.

“What’s — er — going on with you and her anyway?” Ron asked quietly.

“Nothing,” said Harry truthfully.

“I — er — heard she’s going out with someone else now,” said Hermione tentatively.

Harry was surprised to find that this information did not hurt at all. Wanting to impress Cho seemed to belong to a past that was no longer quite connected with him. So much of what he had wanted before Sirius’s death felt that way these days. . . . The week that had elapsed since he had last seen Sirius seemed to have lasted much, much longer. It stretched across two universes, the one with Sirius in it, and the one without.

“You’re well out of it, mate,” said Ron forcefully. “I mean, she’s quite good-looking and all that, but you want someone a bit more cheerful.”

“She’s probably cheerful enough with someone else,” said Harry, shrugging.

“Who’s she with now anyway?” Ron asked Hermione, but it was Ginny who answered.

“Michael Corner,” she said.

“Michael — but —” said Ron, craning around in his seat to stare at her. “But you were going out with him!”

“Not anymore,” said Ginny resolutely. “He didn’t like Gryffindor beating Ravenclaw at Quidditch and got really sulky, so I ditched him and he ran off to comfort Cho instead.” She scratched her nose absently with the end of her quill, turned *The Quibbler* upside down, and began marking her answers. Ron looked highly delighted.

“Well, I always thought he was a bit of an idiot,” he said, prodding his queen forward toward Harry’s quivering castle. “Good for you. Just choose someone — better — next time.”

He cast Harry an oddly furtive look as he said it.

“Well, I’ve chosen Dean Thomas, would you say he’s better?” asked Ginny vaguely.

“WHAT?” shouted Ron, upending the chessboard. Crookshanks went plunging after the pieces and Hedwig and Pigwidgeon twittered and hooted angrily from overhead.

As the train slowed down in the approach to King’s Cross, Harry thought he had never wanted to leave it less. He even wondered fleetingly what would happen if he simply refused to get off, but remained stubbornly sitting there until the first of September, when it would take him back to Hogwarts. When it finally puffed to a standstill, however, he lifted down Hedwig’s cage and prepared to drag his trunk from the train as usual.

When the ticket inspector signaled to him, Ron, and Hermione that

it was safe to walk through the magical barrier between platforms nine and ten, however, he found a surprise awaiting him on the other side: a group of people standing there to greet him whom he had not expected at all.

There was Mad-Eye Moody, looking quite as sinister with his bowler hat pulled low over his magical eye as he would have done without it, his gnarled hands clutching a long staff, his body wrapped in a voluminous traveling cloak. Tonks stood just behind him, her bright bubble-gum-pink hair gleaming in the sunlight filtering through the dirty glass station ceiling, wearing heavily patched jeans and a bright purple T-shirt bearing the legend THE WEIRD SISTERS. Next to Tonks was Lupin, his face pale, his hair graying, a long and threadbare overcoat covering a shabby jumper and trousers. At the front of the group stood Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, dressed in their Muggle best, and Fred and George, who were both wearing brand-new jackets in some lurid green, scaly material.

“Ron, Ginny!” called Mrs. Weasley, hurrying forward and hugging her children tightly. “Oh, and Harry dear — how are you?”

“Fine,” lied Harry, as she pulled him into a tight embrace. Over her shoulder he saw Ron goggling at the twins’ new clothes.

“What are *they* supposed to be?” he asked, pointing at the jackets.

“Finest dragon skin, little bro,” said Fred, giving his zip a little tweak. “Business is booming and we thought we’d treat ourselves.”

“Hello, Harry,” said Lupin, as Mrs. Weasley let go of Harry and turned to greet Hermione.

“Hi,” said Harry. “I didn’t expect . . . what are you all doing here?”

“Well,” said Lupin with a slight smile, “we thought we might have a little chat with your aunt and uncle before letting them take you home.”

“I dunno if that’s a good idea,” said Harry at once.

“Oh, I think it is,” growled Moody, who had limped a little closer. “That’ll be them, will it, Potter?”

He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder; his magical eye was evidently peering through the back of his head and his bowler hat. Harry leaned an inch or so to the left to see where Mad-Eye was pointing and there, sure enough, were the three Dursleys, who looked positively appalled to see Harry’s reception committee.

“Ah, Harry!” said Mr. Weasley, turning from Hermione’s parents, whom he had been greeting enthusiastically, and who were taking it in turns to hug Hermione. “Well — shall we do it, then?”

“Yeah, I reckon so, Arthur,” said Moody.

He and Mr. Weasley took the lead across the station toward the place where the Dursleys stood, apparently rooted to the floor. Hermione disengaged herself gently from her mother to join the group.

“Good afternoon,” said Mr. Weasley pleasantly to Uncle Vernon, coming to a halt right in front of him. “You might remember me, my name’s Arthur Weasley.”

As Mr. Weasley had singlehandedly demolished most of the Dursleys’ living room two years previously, Harry would have been very surprised if Uncle Vernon had forgotten him. Sure enough, Uncle Vernon turned a deeper shade of puce and glared at Mr. Weasley, but chose not to say anything, partly, perhaps, because the Dursleys were

outnumbered two to one. Aunt Petunia looked both frightened and embarrassed. She kept glancing around, as though terrified somebody she knew would see her in such company. Dudley, meanwhile, seemed to be trying to look small and insignificant, a feat at which he was failing extravagantly.

"We thought we'd just have a few words with you about Harry," said Mr. Weasley, still smiling.

"Yeah," growled Moody. "About how he's treated when he's at your place."

Uncle Vernon's mustache seemed to bristle with indignation. Possibly because the bowler hat gave him the entirely mistaken impression that he was dealing with a kindred spirit, he addressed himself to Moody.

"I am not aware that it is any of your business what goes on in my house —"

"I expect what you're not aware of would fill several books, Dursley," growled Moody.

"Anyway, that's not the point," interjected Tonks, whose pink hair seemed to offend Aunt Petunia more than all the rest put together, for she closed her eyes rather than look at her. "The point is, if we find out you've been horrible to Harry —"

"— and make no mistake, we'll hear about it," added Lupin pleasantly.

"Yes," said Mr. Weasley, "even if you won't let Harry use the fellytone —"

"*Telephone*," whispered Hermione.

"Yeah, if we get any hint that Potter's been mistreated in any way,

you'll have us to answer to," said Moody.

Uncle Vernon swelled ominously. His sense of outrage seemed to outweigh even his fear of this bunch of oddballs.

"Are you threatening me, sir?" he said, so loudly that passersby actually turned to stare.

"Yes, I am," said Mad-Eye, who seemed rather pleased that Uncle Vernon had grasped this fact so quickly.

"And do I look like the kind of man who can be intimidated?" barked Uncle Vernon.

"Well . . ." said Moody, pushing back his bowler hat to reveal his sinisterly revolving magical eye. Uncle Vernon leapt backward in horror and collided painfully with a luggage trolley. "Yes, I'd have to say you do, Dursley."

He turned from Uncle Vernon to Harry. "So, Potter . . . give us a shout if you need us. If we don't hear from you for three days in a row, we'll send someone along . . ."

Aunt Petunia whimpered piteously. It could not have been plainer that she was thinking of what the neighbors would say if they caught sight of these people marching up the garden path.

"Bye, then, Potter," said Moody, grasping Harry's shoulder for a moment with a gnarled hand.

"Take care, Harry," said Lupin quietly. "Keep in touch."

"Harry, we'll have you away from there as soon as we can," Mrs. Weasley whispered, hugging him again.

"We'll see you soon, mate," said Ron anxiously, shaking Harry's hand.

"Really soon, Harry," said Hermione earnestly. "We promise."

Harry nodded. He somehow could not find words to tell them what it meant to him, to see them all ranged there, on his side. Instead he smiled, raised a hand in farewell, turned around, and led the way out of the station toward the sunlit street, with Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley hurrying along in his wake.

Die tweede oorlog begin

HY-WAT-NIE-GENOEM-MAG-WORD-NIE KEER TERUG

In 'n kort persverklaring het die Minister vir Towerkuns, Cornelius Broddelwerk, Vrydagaand bevestig dat Hy-Wat-Nie-Genoem-Mag-Word-Nie teruggekeer het en weer aktief is.

"Dis met leedwese dat ek bevestig dat die towenaar wat homself die Heer – wel, julle weet wie ek bedoel – weer met ons is," het 'n duidelik moe en oorblufte Broddelwerk aan verslaggewers gesê. "Ons moet met dieselfde mate van spyt aankondig dat die Dementors van Azkaban gerebelleer het en nie meer in diens van die Ministerie wil wees nie. Ons reken dat die Dementors tans hul opdragte by die Heer – Watsenaam – kry.

"Ons maan die towenaarsgemeenskap om op hul hoede te wees. Die Ministerie is tans besig om gidse vir elementêre persoonlike en tuis-teverdediging saam te stel, wat binnekort gratis by alle towenaarswonings afgelewer sal word."

Die Minister se verklaring is met skok en ontnugtering deur die towenaarsgemeenskap ontvang, wat tot so onlangs as Woensdag nog deur die Ministerie verseker is dat daar "geen waarheid steek in die gerugte dat Jy-Weet-Wie weer aktief is nie".

Besonderhede van die gebeure wat tot die Ministerie se ommeswaai gelei het, is nog vaag, maar na bewering het Hy-Wat-Nie-Genoem-Mag-Word-Nie en 'n uitgesoekte groepie volgelingen (bekend as Doodseters) Donderdagnag toegang tot die Ministerie vir Towerkuns gekry.

Albus Dompeldorius, wat intussen heraanstelling is as Skoolhoof by Hogwarts Skool vir Hekserij en Towerkuns, asook as lid van die Internasionale Konfederasie van Townaars en Hoofstownaar van die Townaarshoërthof, was tot dusver nie beskikbaar vir kommentaar nie. Hy het die afgelope jaar volgehou dat Jy-Weet-Wie nie dood is soos algemeen geglo is nie, maar dat hy besig is om volgelingen te werf vir 'n hernude magsgreep. Intussen het "die seun wat bly leef het" –

"Daar het jy dit, Harry. Ek het geweet hulle sal jou op die een of ander manier hier insleep," sê Hermien en kyk bo-oor die koerant na hom.

Hulle is almal in die siekeboeg. Harry sit op die voetenent van Ron se bed en luister terwyl Hermien die voorblad van die *Sondag Profeet* vir hulle voorlees. Ginny, wie se enkel in 'n japtrap deur Madame Pomfrey genees is, sit opgekrul op Hermien se voetenent en Neville, wie se neus intussen tot sy normale vorm en grootte teruggekeer het, sit op 'n stoel tussen die twee beddens. Net Mania Goedliet, wat kom kuier het en die jongste uitgawe van *Die Vitter* onderstebo sit en lees, het blykbaar nie gehoor wat Hermien lees nie.

"So nou is hy weer 'die seun wat bly leef het', hè?" sê Ron ergerlik. "En nie meer die misleide grootprater nie?"

Hy raap 'n hand vol Sjokoladepaddas op van die enorme hoop op sy bedkassie, gooi 'n paar na Harry, Ginny en Neville en skeur syne met sy tande oop. Daar is nog steeds diep sere op sy voorarms waar die brein se tentakels om hom geslaan was. Volgens Madame Pomfrey laat gedagtes dieper letsels as amper enigiets anders, hoewel dit baie beter gaan vandat sy Dokter Kwak se Vergeetkousdoepa begin aansmeer het.

"Ja, hulle is nou vol lof vir jou, Harry," sê Hermien, wat die res van die artikel vlugtig bekyk. "'n Stil stem van waarheid . . . het ten spyte van bewerings van ongebalanseerdheid nie gewankel . . . moes spottery en laster verduur . . . ' Hm," sê sy met 'n frons, "ek sien hulle noem nie die feit dat die *Profeet* die voorbok was met die spottery en laster nie . . ."

Sy krimp effens ineen en vat-vat aan haar ribbes. Hoewel die vloek wat Dolohov op haar gebruik het minder effektief was omdat hy die spreuk nie hardop kon sê nie, het dit, in Madame Pomfrey se woorde, "heeltemal genoeg skade aangerig". Hermien moet elke dag minstens tien towerdrankies drink, maar sy voel al baie beter en is reeds siek en sat vir die siekeboeg.

"Jy-Weet-Wie se mees onlangse poging om oor te neem, bladsy twee tot vier; Wat die Ministerie vir ons moes vertel het, bladsy vyf; Hoekom niemand na Albus Dompeldortius wou luister nie, bladsy ses tot agt; Eksklusiewe onderhoud met Harry Potter, bladsy nege . . . Wel," sê Hermien toe sy die koerant opvou en eenkant neersit, "hulle het beslis genoeg om oor te skryf. En daardie onderhoud met Harry is glad nie eksklusief nie, dis die een wat maande gelede in *Die Vitter* was . . ."

"Pappie het dit aan hulle verkoop," sê Mania vaag en blaai om.

"Hy't 'n baie goeie prys gekry, so goed dat ons hierdie somervakansie op 'n ekspedisie na Swede gaan om te sien of ons 'n frommelhoring-snorklap kan vang."

Dit lyk of Hermien 'n oomblik met haarself moet worstel voor sy sê: "Dit klink heerlik."

Ginny vang Harry se oog, grinnik en kyk weg.

"Nou ja," sê Hermien. Sy skuif regop en krimp weer ineen.

"Wat gaan alles in die skool aan?"

"Wel, Flickerpitt het van Fred en George se moeras ontslae geraak," sê Ginny, "in minder as drie sekondes! Maar hy't 'n klein kolletjie onder die venster gelos en 'n tou daarom gespan –"

"Hoekom?" vra Hermien verbaas.

"Weet nie, hy sê glo dis 'n baie oulike stukkie toorkuns," sê Ginny skouerophalend.

"Ek dink dis 'n soort monument vir Fred en George," sê Ron met sy mond vol sjokolade. "Hulle het dit alles gestuur, weet jy," sê hy vir Harry en wys na die stapel Paddas langs hom. "Die grapwinkel doen blykbaar heel goed."

Hermien lyk alkeurend. "Het al die moeilikheid nou opgehou vandat Dompeldorius terug is?"

"Ja," sê Neville, "alles is weer normaal."

"Fillis is ook seker tevrede, hè?" vra Ron en maak 'n Sjokolade-paddakaart van Dompeldorius teen sy waterbeker staan.

"Glad nie," sê Ginny. "Hy is baie, baie miserabel, regtig." Haar stem sak tot 'n fluistering. "Hy bly sê Umbridge was die beste ding wat nog ooit met Hogwarts gebeur het . . ."

Al ses van hulle kyk om. Professor Umbridge lê in die bed oorkant hulle en staar na die plafon. Dompeldorius het die Woud alleen binnegegaan om haar van die sentours te red. Wat hy gedoen het en hoe hy sonder 'n skrapie met Umbridge uit die Woud teruggekeer het, weet nugter – en Umbridge is die laaste een wat sal praat. Sedert haar terugkoms na die kasteel het sy nog nie 'n enkele woord gesê nie. Niemand weet regtig wat haar makeer nie. Daar is nog steeds blare en takkies in haar deurmekaar grys muishare, wat gewoonlik pynlik netjies is, maar andersins lyk sy ongedeerd.

"Madame Pomfrey sê sy ly aan skok," fluister Hermien.

"Lyk vir my meer of sy dikmond is," sê Ginny.

"Ja, sy toon tekens van lewe as jy dit doen." Ron maak gedempte klip-klop-geluide met sy tong. Umbridge sit kiertsregop en kyk wild rond.

"Is daar fout, Professor?" roep Madame Pomfrey uit en steek haar kop om haar kantoor se deur.

"Nee . . . nee . . ." sê Umbridge en sak terug teen haar kussings.
"Nee, ek het net gedroom . . ."

Hermien en Ginny druk die beddegoed in hul monde om nie hard te lag nie.

"Gepraat van sentours," sê Hermien toe sy weer kan praat, "wie gee nou Waarsêery? Is Firenze nog hier?"

"Hy is seker maar," sê Harry, "die ander sentours sal hom mos nie terugneem nie, of hoe?"

"Dit lyk of hy én Trelawney gaan klasgee," sê Ginny.

"Ek wed Dompeldorius wil eintlik van Trelawney ontslae raak." Ron kou langtand aan sy veertiende Padda. "Maar regtig, ek dink die vak is 'n gemors, en Firenze is nie veel beter nie . . ."

"Hoe kan jy dit sê?" vra Hermien. "Ons het dan nou self gesien daar is egte profesieë!"

Harry se hart klop vinniger. Hy het nie vir Ron, Hermien of enigiemand anders vertel wat die inhoud van die profesie was nie. Neville het vir hulle vertel dat dit gebreek het toe Harry hom in die Doodskamer met die trappe opgehelp het en Harry het hulle nie reggehelp nie. Hy sien nie kans vir die uitdrukkings op hul gesigte as hulle moet hoor dat hy óf moordenaar óf slagoffer gaan wees nie.

"Dis jammer dat dit gebreek het." Hermien skud haar kop.

"Ja, dit is omtrent," sê Ron. "Maar ten minste weet Jy-Weet-Wie nie wat dit is – hei, waarheen gaan jy?" Hy lyk verbaas en teleurgesteld toe Harry opstaan.

"Hm – na Hagrid toe," sê Harry. "Hy's so pas teruggekom en ek het belowe ek sal kom kuier en hom vertel hoe dit met julle gaan."

"O, goed dan," sê Ron nors en kyk deur die siekeboeg se venster na die kolletjie blou lug aan die buitekant. "Ek wens ek kon saamkom."

"Sê vir hom groete!" roep Hermien uit toe Harry wegstap. "En vra vir hom hoe gaan dit met . . . met sy klein maatjie!"

Harry lig sy hand om te wys dat hy gehoor het en verstaan voor hy uitstap.

Die kasteel is baie stil, selfs vir 'n Sondag. Almal is buite op die sonnige terrein om die einde van die eksamen en die laaste paar dae van die kwartaal te geniet sonder die las van hersiening of huiswerk. Harry stap stadig deur die verlate gang en kyk deur die vensters buitentoe. Hy sien mense bo die Kwiddiekveld rondspeel en 'n paar studente wat saam met die reuse-inkvis in die meer swem.

Hy kan nie besluit of hy by mense wil wees of nie. Wanneer hy

tussen mense is, wil hy weg wees en sodra hy weer alleen is, smag hy na geselskap. Hy sal maar vir Hagrid gaan kuier. Hulle het nog nie behoorlik gesels sedert sy terugkoms nie.

Harry het net met die marmertrappe af gestap na die ingangsportaal toe Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat by 'n deur aan die regterkant uitkom. Harry weet dis die deur wat na die Slibberin-geselskamer lei. Hy gaan staan botstil en so ook Malfoy-hulle. Al geluide is die krete, gelag en geplas wat van buite deur die oop voordeure tot in die ingangsportaal instroom.

Malfoy loer rond, duidelik op die uitkyk vir onderwysers. Dan kyk hy terug na Harry en sê in 'n skerp stem: "Jy is dood, Potter."

Harry lig sy wenkbroue.

"Snaaks," sê hy, "dat ek nog hier rondloop."

Malfoy lyk kwater as wat Harry hom nog ooit gesien het en Harry geniet dit op 'n vreemde manier om sy bleek, skerp gesig so vertrek van woede te sien.

"Jy gaan betaal," sê Malfoy in 'n stem skaars bo 'n fluistering. "Ek gaan seker maak dat jy betaal vir wat jy aan my vader gedoen het . . ."

"O, nou is ek só bang," sê Harry sarkasties. "Ek veronderstel die Heer Woldmort was net 'n opwarmingsoefening vir julle drie – wat makeer?" voeg hy by toe Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat verskrik lyk by die aanhoor van die naam. "Hy's dan julle pa's se maatjie? Julle is darem seker nie bang vir hom nie?"

"Jy dink jy's so groot, Potter." Malfoy tree dreigend nader, met Krabbe en Goliat aan weerskante van hom. "Wag net. Ek sal jou kry. Jy moenie dink jy kan my pa tronk toe laat gaan –"

"Ek dag ek het so pas," sê Harry.

"Die Dementors het Azkaban verlaat," sê Malfoy kil. "Vader-hulle sal binnekort vry wees . . ."

"Ja, hulle sal seker. Maar ten minste weet almal nou watse skurke hulle is."

Malfoy se hand vlieg na sy towerstaf, maar Harry is te vinnig vir hom. Sy eie towerstaf is gereed nog voor Malfoy sy vingers in sy kleed se sak kan steek.

"Potter!"

Die stem weerklink deur die ingangsportaal. Snerp staan by die trappe voor sy kantoor. Toe Harry hom sien, ervaar hy 'n golf van haat, baie groter as wat hy vir Malfoy voel . . . Ongeag wat Dompeldorius ook al sê, hy sal vir Snerp nooit vergewe nie . . . nooit . . .

"Wat doen jy, Potter?" vra Snerp so koud soos altyd terwyl hy nader stap.

"Ek probeer besluit watter vloek om op Malfoy te gebruik, meneer," sê Harry woedend.

Snerp staar na hom.

"Sit daardie towerstaf dadelik weg," sê hy kortaf. "Tien punte van Griffin-"

Snerp kyk op na die reuse-uurglase teen die mure en glimlag snedig.

"A, ek sien daar is nie meer enige punte oor vir Griffindor om te verloor nie. In daardie geval, Potter, sal ons eenvoudig moet –"

"Byvoeg?"

Professor McGonagall stap hinkend met die kliptrappe voor die kasteel op. Sy dra 'n groot tartansak in een hand en leun swaar op 'n kerie met haar ander hand, maar andersins lyk sy pieksyn.

"Professor McGonagall!" sê Snerp en tree vorentoe. "Ontslaan uit Sint Mungo!"

"Ja, professor Snerp," sê professor McGonagall en gooi haar reis-mantel af. "Ek is so goed soos nuut. Julle twee – Krabbe – Goliat –"

Sy wink hulle gebiedend nader en hulle kom sleepvoet vorentoe terwyl hulle baie ongemaklik lyk.

"Hier." Professor McGonagall druk haar tartansak in Krabbe se hande en haar mantel in Goliat s'n. "Neem dit na my kantoor."

Hulle draai om en strompel met die marmertrappe op.

"Nou goed." Professor McGonagall kyk na die uurglase teen die muur. "Wel, ek dink Potter en sy maats behoort elk vyftig punte te kry omdat hulle die wêreld gewaarsku het dat Jy-Weet-Wie terug is! Wat dink jy daarvan, professor Snerp?"

"Wat?" snou Snerp, maar Harry weet hy het haar goed gehoor. "O – ja – seker . . ."

"Dis dan vyftig punte vir Potter, die twee Weasleys, Loggerenberg en juffrou La Grange," sê professor McGonagall en terwyl sy praat, val 'n haelbui robyne van die bokant af in Griffindor se uurglas. "O ja, en vyftig vir juffrou Goedliet," voeg sy by. 'n Klompie saffiere val in Raweklou se uurglas. "Wel, ek dink jy wou tien vir meneer Potter aftrek, professor Snerp – hier gaan ons . . ."

'n Paar robyne vlieg terug boontoe, maar daar bly nietermin 'n aansienlike hoeveelheid onder in die uurglas oor.

"Goed, Potter, Malfoy, ek dink op 'n lieflike dag soos vandag moet julle buite wees," sê professor McGonagall flink.

Sy hoef dit nie twee keer vir Harry te sê nie. Hy steek sy towerstaf terug in sy kleed en stap na die voordeur sonder om weer na Snerp of Malfoy te kyk.

Die warm son tref hom in die gesig toe hy oor die terrein na

Hagrid se hut begin stap. Studente lê op die grasperke en bak, hulle gesels, lees die *Sondag Profeet* en eet lekkers. Hulle kyk op toe hy verbystap en sommige skree iets of waai, gretig om te wys dat hulle ook, nes die *Profeet*, besluit het hy is nou 'n held. Harry sê niks vir iemand nie. Hy weet nie wat hulle weet nie, maar hy het dit tot dusver reggekry om die vrae te vermy en verkies dit so.

Hy klop aan Hagrid se deur. Sy eerste gedagte is dat Hagrid uit is, maar toe Tande om die hoek storm en hom amper onderstebo spring, besef hy Hagrid moet agter in sy groentetuin wees.

"Alles reg, Harry?" sê Hagrid stralend toe Harry nader stap. "Ek was besig om rankboontjies te pluk. Kom in, kom in, kom drink 'n glas botterblomsap . . ."

"Hoe gaan dit?" vra Hagrid toe hulle by die houttafel gaan sit, elkeen met 'n glas sap en ysblokkies. "Jy – hm – jy voel oukei, hè?"

Harry weet aan die bekommerde uitdrukking op Hagrid se gesig dat hy nie na sy gesondheid verwys nie.

"Ek's oukei," sê Harry vinnig. Hy kan dit nie verduur om te praat oor dit wat hy weet voorop in Hagrid se gedagtes is nie. "So, waar was jy?"

"In die berg weggekruip. In 'n grot, soos Sirius toe hy –" Hagrid bly stil, maak keel skoon, kyk na Harry en neem 'n groot sluk sap. "In elk geval, ek's nou weer terug," eindig hy floutjies.

"Jy – jy lyk beter," sê Harry, wat vasberade is om die gesprek weg van Sirius te stuur.

"Wat?" Hagrid lig 'n groot hand en bevoel sy gesig. "O – o ja. Wel, Ghroppie is tonne beter, tonne. Was baie bly om my te sien toe ek terugkom, regtig! Hy's 'n goeie seun . . . ek het gedink ek moet vir hom 'n meisie probeer kry . . ."

Harry sou normaalweg dadelik probeer het om Hagrid hieruit te praat. Die vooruitsig aan 'n tweede reus in die Woud, dalk selfs nog wilder en gemener as Ghrop, is werklik afgryslik, maar hy kan nie die energie bymekaarskraap om daaroor te stry nie. Hy begin weer wens hy was eerder alleen en neem 'n paar groot slukke botterblomsap sodat hy hom gouer uit die voete kan maak.

"Almal weet nou dat jy die waarheid gepraat het, Harry," sê Hagrid onverwags. Hy kyk stip na Harry. "Dit laat jou seker beter voel, hè?"

Harry haal sy skouers op.

"Luister . . ." Hagrid leun oor die tafel na hom, "ek het vir Sirius langer as jy geken . . . Hy't tot die dood toe geveg . . . dis hoe hy sou wou gaan."

"Hy wou nie nou al gaan nie!" sê Harry verwoed.

Hagrid laat sak sy ruie kop.

"Nee, ek skat hy wou nie," sê hy sag. "Maar tog, Harry . . . hy was nooit een vir by die huis rondsit terwyl ander mense die bakleiery doen nie. Hy sou nie met homself kon saamleef as hy nie gaan help het nie –"

Harry vlieg op. "Ek moet vir Ron en Hermien in die siekeboeg gaan kuier."

"O." Hagrid lyk afgehaal. "O . . . goed dan, Harry . . . Mooi loop en kom kuier weer as jy 'n kans –"

"Ja, ek maak so."

Harry stap vinnig deur toe en trek dit oop. Hy is buite in die sonskyn en begin die grasperk oorsteek voor Hagrid hom ordentlik kan groet. Mense roep weer in die verbystap na hom, sodat hy sy oë 'n paar keer toemaak en wens almal wil net wegraak sodat hy alleen kan wees.

Net 'n paar dae gelede, voor die laaste dag van sy eksamen toe hy die visioen gehad het wat Woldemort in sy brein geplant het, sou hy feitlik enigiets gee dat die towenaarswêreld moet weet hy praat die waarheid, dat Woldemort terug is, dat hy nie 'n leuenaar of mal is nie, maar nou . . .

Hy loop 'n ent om die meer en gaan sit op 'n bank in 'n ruigte, weggesteek van verbygangers se nuuskierige oë, en staar peinsend oor die glinsterende water . . .

Dalk is die rede hoekom hy alleen wil wees omdat hy so afgesny van almal voel sedert sy gesprek met Dompeldorius. Dis of 'n onsigbare muur hom van die res van die wêreld skei. Hy is – was nog altyd – 'n gemerkte man. Dis net dat hy nooit regtig verstaan het wat dit beteken nie.

En tog, terwyl hy hier langs die meer sit met die verskriklike verlies van Sirius rou in sy binneste, voel hy geen vrees nie. Die sonskyn en die terrein is vol laggende mense en hoewel hy so ver verwyder van hulle voel dat hulle net sowel 'n ander spesie kon wees, is dit nog steeds bitter swaar om te glo dat sy lewe 'n moord moet insluit, of met 'n moord moet eindig.

Hy sit lank oor die water en staar terwyl hy probeer om nie aan sy peetpa te dink nie, nie te onthou hoe Sirius op die oorkantste bank ineengestort het toe 'n honderd Dementors hom aangeval het nie.

Die son het reeds gesak voor hy besef hy kry koud. Hy vee sy gesig aan sy mou af, staan op en stap terug kasteel toe.

Ron en Hermien, heeltemal gesond, word drie dae voor die einde van die kwartaal uit die siekeboek ontslaan. Hermien wil nog steeds oor Sirius praat, maar Ron maak "sjjj"-geluide sodra sy sy naam noem. Harry kan nie besluit of hy al gereed is om oor sy peetpa te praat nie. Sy wense wissel met sy bui. Maar hy weet een ding: hoe ongelukkig hy nou ook al is, hy gaan Hogwarts bitterlik mis wanneer hy eers weer terug is in Ligusterlaan 4. Hy verstaan nou hoekom hy elke somervakansie soontoe moet gaan, maar dit laat hom nie beter voel nie en hy het nog nooit so erg daarteen opgesien nie.

Professor Umbridge het Hogwarts die dag voor die einde van die kwartaal verlaat. Dit blyk dat sy tydens aandete uit die siekeboek gesluip en probeer het om ongesiens weg te glip. Ongelukkig vir haar het sy vir Nurks langs die pad raakgeloop, wat sy laaste kans aangegryp het om Fred se instruksies te gehoorsaam. Hy het haar met 'n groot gejuig oor die terrein gejaag en om die beurt met 'n kerie en 'n sokkie vol kalk getakel. 'n Klomp studente het na die ingangsportaal gestorm om te sien hoe sy na die hekke hardloop terwyl die Hoofde van die Huise baie halfhartig probeer het om hulle te beheer. Professor McGonagall het ná 'n paar flou vermanings op haar stoel neergesak en gesê as Nurks nie haar kerie geleen het nie, sou sy ook juigend agter Umbridge aangestorm het.

Dis die laaste aand van die kwartaal. Die meeste studente het klaar ingepak en is op pad na die fees in die Groot Saal. Net Harry het nog nie eens begin nie.

"Doen dit môre!" sê Ron, wat by die deur van hul slaapsaal staan en wag. "Kom nou, ek gaan dood van die honger!"

"Ek kom nou . . . gaan jy solank."

Maar toe die slaapsaal se deur agter Ron toegaan, wend Harry geen poging aan om verder in te pak nie. Die laaste ding waarvoor hy lus is, is die fees vir die einde van die jaar. Wat as Dompeldorius in sy toespraak oor hom praat? Hy sal beslis noem dat Woldemort terug is, hy het die vorige jaar ook daarvoor gepraat.

Harry trek 'n paar verkreukelde klede uit sy trommel om sy klere wat netjies opgevou is daarin te pak, toe hy 'n slordig toegedraaide pakkie onder 'n paar slenterskoene sien lê. Hy het nie 'n idee wat dit is nie en buk om dit uit te haal.

Hy herken dit dadelik. Sirius het dit by die voordeur van Grimmauldplein 12 vir hom gegee. "Gebruik dit as jy my nodig het."

Harry gaan sit op sy bed en maak die pakkie oop. 'n Klein, vierkantige spieëltjie val daaruit. Dis oud en baie vuil. Harry hou dit voor sy gesig en sien sy eie weerkaatsing daarin.

Hy draai die spieël om. Daar is 'n briefie van Sirius aan die agterkant.

Dis 'n tweerigtingspieël, ek het die ander een. As jy ooit met my moet praat, sê my naam daarin. Jy sal in my spieël verskyn en ek sal met jou in joune praat. Ek en James het dit gebruik as ons apart detensie moes doen.

Harry se hart klop vinniger. Hy onthou hoe hy sy ma en pa vier jaar gelede in die Spieël van Etreegeb gesien het. Hy sal weer met Sirius kan praat, hy weet dit –

Hy kyk rond om seker te maak dat daar niemand anders is nie. Die slaapsaal is heeltemal leeg. Hy hou die spieël met bewende hande voor sy gesig en sê hard en duidelik: "Sirius."

Sy asem laat die spieël aanslaan. Hy hou dit nog nader terwyl 'n gevoel van opwinding oor hom spoel, maar die oë wat deur die wasem na hom kyk, is beslis sy eie . . .

Hy vee die spieël skoon en sê weer hard en duidelik sodat elke lettergreep deur die kamer weerklink:

"Sirius Swardt!"

Niks gebeur nie. Die gefrustreerde gesig wat uit die spieël terugkyk, is sy eie.

Sirius het nie sy spieël by hom gehad toe hy deur die poort is nie, sê 'n stemmetjie in Harry se kop. Dis hoekom dit nie werk nie.

Harry sit 'n rukkie doodstil, dan smyt hy die spieël terug in die trommel sodat dit breek. Hy was vir een wonderlike oomblik oortuig dat hy vir Sirius gaan sien, met hom gaan praat . . .

Sy keel brand van teleurstelling terwyl hy sy goed in sy trommel bo-op die stukkende spieël gooi.

Maar dan tref 'n idee hom . . . 'n beter idee as die spieël, 'n baie beter idee . . . Hoekom het hy nog nooit tevore daaraan gedink nie – hoekom het hy nog nooit eens gevra nie?

Hy nael deur die slaapsaal en af met die wenteltrap. Hy bots teen die mure maar voel dit skaars, storm deur die leë geselskamer, deur die portretopening en af in die gang. Die Vet Vrou skree: "Die fees gaan binnekort begin, jy moet opskud!" maar hy ignoreer haar. Hy is nie van plan om fees toe te gaan nie.

Hy hardloop met trappe af en deur gange sonder om enigiemand, dood of lewend, raak te loop. Almal is seker reeds in die Groot Saal, dink hy toe hy hygend voor professor Flickerpitt se klaskamer tot stilstand kom. Hy sal tot later moet wag, tot ná die fees.

Dan sien hy dit: 'n wasige iets wat deur die gang sweef.

"Haai – haai, Nick! NICK!"

Die spook steek sy kop deur die muur – dis die wankelende kop en swierig gepluimde hoed van Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington.

"Goeienaand." Die res van sy liggaam gly deur die soliede klipmuur en hy glimlag vir Harry. "Ek is dus nie die enigste een wat laat is nie."

"Nick, kan ek vir jou iets vra?"

'n Baie vreemde uitdrukking speel oor Nick-amper-sonder-kop se gesig. Hy steek sy vinger in die stywe val om sy nek en rem effens daaraan, skynbaar om tyd te wen. Hy hou eers op toe sy half afgekapte kop amper afval.

"Hm – ja, Harry?" sê hy ongemaklik. "Kan dit nie tot ná die fees wag nie?"

"Nee – Nick – asseblief, ek moet met jou praat. Wat van hier binne?"

Nick-amper-sonder-kop sug toe Harry die klaskamer se deur oopmaak.

"Nou goed dan," sê hy gelate. "Ek sal nie maak of ek dit nie verwag het nie."

Harry hou die deur vir hom oop, maar hy sweef deur die muur.

"Wat verwag het?" Harry maak die deur agter hom toe.

"Dat jy my opsoek," sê Nick. Hy gly na die venster en kyk oor die donker terrein. "Dit gebeur soms . . . wanneer iemand 'n . . . verlies gely het."

"Wel," sê Harry. "Jy's reg, ek het – ek het jou kom soek."

Nick antwoord nie.

"Dis –" sê Harry, vir wie dit baie moeiliker is as wat hy verwag het, "dis net – wel, jy's dood. Maar jy's nog steeds hier."

Nick sug en bly net oor die terrein uitstaar.

"Dit is tog so?" por Harry hom aan. "Jy is dood, maar ek kan met jou praat . . . jy loop in Hogwarts rond en alles."

"Ja," sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop stadig. "Ek loop en ek praat, ja."

"Jy't dus teruggekóm?" sê Harry dringend. "Mense kan terugkom, nê? As spoke. Hulle hoef nie vir altyd weg te raak nie. Of hoe?" sê hy ongeduldig toe Nick nie antwoord nie.

Nick-amper-sonder-kop aarsel, dan sê hy: "Nie almal kan as spoke terugkom nie."

"Wat bedoel jy?" vra Harry vinnig.

"Net . . . net towenaars kan."

"O!" Harry lag amper van verligting. "Wel, dis dan oukei, want die persoon van wie ek praat, is 'n toenaar. Hy kan dus terugkom, nê?"

Nick kyk droewig na Harry.

"Hy sal nie terugkom nie."

"Wie sal nie?"

"Sirius Swardt."

"Maar jy het!" sê Harry vererg. "Jy het teruggekom – jy's dood, maar jy't nie net weggeraak nie –"

"Towenaars kan 'n beeld van hulself op die aarde agterlaat. Dit wandel bleek waar hul lewende liggame eens was," sê Nick mistroostig. "Maar baie min towenaars kies daardie uitweg."

"Hoekom nie?" vra Harry. "Nie dat dit saak maak nie. Sirius sal nie omgee as dit 'n bietjie anders is nie – hy sal terugkom, ek weet hy sal!"

So sterk is Harry se vertroue dat hy na die deur kyk en hom vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde verbeel hy sien hoe Sirius, pêrelwit en deurskynend maar met 'n stralende gesig, na hom kom.

"Hy sal nie," herhaal Nick. "Hy sal . . . verder gaan."

"Wat bedoel jy met 'verder gaan'? Waarheen gaan? Hoor hier – wat gebeur in elk geval as jy doodgaan? Waarheen gaan jy? Hoekom kom almal nie terug nie? Hoekom is hierdie hele plek nie vol spoke nie? Hoekom –?"

"Ek weet nie," sê Nick.

"Maar jy's dood!" sê Harry wanhopig. "Jy moet weet!"

"Ek was bang vir die dood," sê Nick sag. "Ek het gekies om te bly. Soms wonder ek of ek nie . . . Wel, dit maak nie saak nie . . . ek is nóg hier nóg daar . . ." Hy gee 'n droewige laggie. "Ek weet niks van die geheime van die dood nie, Harry, want ek het hierdie flou nabootsing van die lewe gekies. Ek het gehoor dat geleerde towenaars die verskynsel in die Departement vir Geheime bestudeer –"

"Ek wil nie oor daardie plek praat nie!" sê Harry kwaad.

"Ek is jammer dat ek jou nie meer kan help nie," sê Nick simpatiek. "Wel . . . verskoon my . . . die fees, weet jy."

En hy verlaat die kamer. Harry bly agter en staar dof na die muur waardeur Nick verdwyn het.

Dit voel vir Harry of hy Sirius 'n tweede keer verloor het nou dat alle hoop om hom weer te sien of met hom te praat finaal verlore is. Hy stap stadig en miserabel terug deur die verlate kasteel en wonder of hy ooit weer vrolik sal voel.

Toe hy om die hoek na die Vet Vrou se gang stap, sien hy iemand wat 'n kennisgewing teen die muur plak. Dis Mania. Daar is nie 'n goeie skuilplek naby nie en sy sou sy voetstappe bepaald gehoor het. Wat meer is, hy het nie op die oomblik die energie om iemand te probeer vermy nie.

"Hallo, Harry," sê Mania dromerig en kyk om na hom toe sy terugtree.

"Hoekom is jy nie by die fees nie?" vra Harry.

"Wel, die meeste van my goed is weg. Van die mense het dit gevat en weggesteek. Maar dis die laaste aand en ek moet dit regtig terugkry. Dis hoekom ek oral kennisgewings opsit."

Sy wys na die kennisgewingbord waarteen sy 'n lys van vermiste boeke en klere geplak het en 'n versoek dat dit moet terugkom.

'n Vreemde gevoel wel in Harry op, 'n emosie wat heeltemal anders is as die woede en hartseer wat hom sedert Sirius se dood vul. Dit neem 'n paar oomblikke voor hy besef dat dit jammerte is wat hy vir Mania voel.

"Hoekom steek hulle jou goed weg?" vra hy fronsend.

"O . . . wel . . ." Sy haal haar skouers op. "Seker omdat hulle dink ek's 'n bietjie snaaks. Party noem my Mallie agter my rug, weet jy."

Harry voel nog jammerder vir haar.

"Dis geen rede om jou goed te vat nie," sê hy vererg. "Kan ek jou help soek?"

"Nee wat." Sy glimlag bedaad. "Ek sal dit wel kry. Ek kry altyd alles op die ou end. Dis net dat ek vanaand wou inpak. Maar hoekom is jy nie by die fees nie?"

Harry haal sy skouers op. "Ek's nie juis lus nie."

"Nee." Mania kyk met haar vreemde, mistige uitpeuloë na hom. "Jy is seker nie. Daardie man wat die Doodseters doodgemaak het, was jou peetpa, nê? Ginny het vir my gesê."

Harry knik effens, maar besef tot sy verbasing dat hy nie omgee om met Mania oor Sirius te praat nie. Hy het so pas onthou dat sy ook die testralle kan sien.

"Het jy . . . ek bedoel, wie het . . . is iemand wat jy ken ook dood?"

"Ja," sê Mania eenvoudig. "My ma. Sy was 'n besondere heks, weet jy, maar sy't allerhande eksperimente gedoen en een van haar paljasse het lelik skeef geloop. Ek was nege."

"Ek is jammer," prewel Harry.

"Dit was regtig aaklig," sê Mania. "Ek voel soms nog hartseer daaroor, maar ek het nog my pa. En dis nie of ek my ma nooit weer sal sien nie."

"Hm – dit is nie?" vra Harry onseker.

Sy skud haar kop ongelowig. "Jy't hulle mos gehoor, daar agter die sluier!"

"Jy bedoel . . ."

"In daardie kamer met die poort. Hulle was daar. Jy't hulle gehoor."

Hulle kyk na mekaar. Mania glimlag effens. Harry weet nie wat om te sê of te dink nie. Mania glo soveel eienaardige goed . . . en tog is hy seker dat hy stemme agter die sluier gehoor het.

"Is jy seker ek kan jou nie help soek nie?" vra hy.

"Nee wat," sê Mania. "Nee, ek gaan eerder af vir 'n skeppie poeding en wag tot alles opdaag . . . dit kom altyd op die ou end terug. Geniet jou vakansie, Harry."

"Ja . . . ja, jy ook."

Sy loop weg van hom, en soos hy haar agternakyk, voel hy die vreeslike gewig in sy maag effens ligter word.

Die volgende dag se reis terug huis toe op die Hogwarts Express is vol wedervaringe. Dit word gou duidelik dat Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat die hele week gewag het vir 'n geleentheid om toe te slaan wanneer daar nie onderwysers in die nabyheid is nie. Hulle lê Harry in die middel van die trein voor toe hy van die toilet af terugstap kompartement toe. Die aanval sou dalk geslaag het as dit nie reg voor 'n kompartement vol DS-lede was wat dit deur die ruit gesien en vir Harry te hulp gesnel het nie. Teen die tyd dat Ernie Macmillan, Hanna Abbott, Susan Bones, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Antonie Goldstein en Terry Boot die groot verskeidenheid paljasse en vloeke gebruik het wat Harry vir hulle geleer het, lyk Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat soos drie slakke in Hogwarts-uniforms. Harry, Ernie en Justin slinger hulle op die bagasierak en los hulle daar om slym af te skei.

"Ek moet sê, ek sal Malfoy se ma se gesig wil sien as hy van die trein afklim," sê Ernie tevrede terwyl hy kyk hoe Malfoy op die rak bo hom lê en wriemel. Ernie het nog nie vir Malfoy vergewe vir die punte wat hy van Hoesenproes afgetrek het toe hy vir 'n rukkie 'n lid van die Onderzoektaakmag was nie.

"Goliat se ma behoort baie in haar skik te wees," sê Ron, wat kom kyk het wat aangaan. "Hy lyk stukke beter. Hoor hier, Harry, die kostrollie het nou net gekom, as jy iets wil hê . . ."

Harry bedank die ander en stap saam met Ron na hul kompartement om 'n groot stapel heksetelkoekies en pampoenpasteitjies te koop. Hermien lees weer die *Daaglikse Profeet*. Ginny doen 'n vasvra in Die Vitter en Neville streel sy *Mimulus Mimbletonia*, wat die afgelope jaar baie gegroei het en vreemde koergeluide maak as jy daaraan raak.

Harry en Ron speel towenaarskaak terwyl Hermien gedeeltes uit die *Profeet* vir hulle voorlees. Dit wemel van artikels oor hoe om Dementors af te weer, pogings deur die Ministerie om Doodseters vas te trek, en historiese briewe waarin beweer word dat die skry-

wer die Heer Woldemort daardie oggend verby hul huise sien loop het.

“Dis nog maar net die begin,” sê Hermien grinnig toe sy die koerant opvou. “Maar dis nie meer lank nie . . .”

“Haai, Harry,” sê Ron en beduie met sy kop na die glasvenster voor die gang.

Harry kyk om. Cho stap verby, vergesel van Marietta Edgecombe, wat ’n balaklawamus ophet. Harry en Cho se oë ontmoet vir ’n oomblik. Cho stap blosend verder en Harry kyk al na die skaakbord, net betyds om te sien hoe Ron se ridder een van sy pionne uit sy blokkie jaag.

“Hm – wat’s dit met jou en haar, hè?” vra Ron sag.

“Niks,” erken Harry.

“Ek – hm – ek hoor sy gaan nou met iemand anders uit,” sê Hermien huiwerig.

Harry is verbaas dat hierdie brokkie inligting hom nie seermaak nie. Om vir Cho te wil beïndruk, behoort tot ’n verlede wat amper onwerklik voel. Sedert Sirius se dood laat baie dinge hom so voel . . . Die week vandat hy Sirius die laaste keer gesien het, het baie langer as normaalweg geduur. Dis asof dit oor twee heelalle strek: een met Sirius en die ander sonder hom.

“Dis nie ’n verlies nie, my ou,” sê Ron. “Ek bedoel, sy’s nogal mooi en alles, maar jy moet darem iemand hê wat ’n bietjie vroliker is.”

“Sy’s seker vrolik genoeg as sy by iemand anders is,” sê Harry ongeërg.

“Vir wie sien sy nou?” vra Ron vir Hermien, maar dis Ginny wat antwoord.

“Michael Corner,” sê sy.

“Michael – maar –” Ron draai op sy sitplek om en staar na haar. “Maar jy’t met hom uitgegaan!”

“Nie meer nie,” sê Ginny beslis. “Hy’t niks daarvan gehou toe Raweklou teen Griffindor verloor het nie. Hy was verskriklik dikbek daaroor. Toe’t ek hom afgesê en toe’t hy vir Cho gaan troos.” Sy krap haar neus ingedagte met haar veerpen se punt, draai *Die Vitter* om en begin om haar antwoorde te merk.

Ron lyk hoogs in sy skik. “Wel, ek het nog altyd gedink hy’s so iets van ’n idioot,” sê hy en stoot sy koningin na Harry se kasteel, wat wegkrimp. “Goed so, Ginny. Kies net volgende keer iemand wat . . . beter is.”

Hy gee ’n vreemde onderlangse kykie na Harry toe hy dit sê.

“Wel, ek het vir Dean Thomas gekies. Dink jy hy’s beter?” vra Ginny.

“WAT?” skree Ron en keer per ongeluk die skaakbord om. Kromskeen sit die stukke dadelik agterna en Hedwig en Pigwidgeon hoe-hoe vererg bo hul koppe.

Hulle nader King's Cross-stasie en die trein begin spoed verloor. Harry was nog nooit traer om af te klim as vandag nie. Hy wonder selfs vlugtig wat sal gebeur as hy eenvoudig hardnekkig in die trein bly sit tot die eerste September wanneer dit terugkeer na Hogwarts. Maar toe hulle eindelijk tot stilstand kom, haal hy Hedwig se kou gedwee af en begin om sy trommel soos gewoonlik in die gang uit te sleep.

Toe die kaartjieknipper beduie dat Harry, Ron en Hermien deur die towerskeiding tussen perron nege en tien mag stap, vind Harry 'n verrassing aan die ander kant. 'n Groep mense wat hy glad nie daar verwag het nie, wag hulle in.

Maloog Moodie is daar, met sy bolhoedjie laag oor sy toweroog getrek, sy knoetsrige hande om 'n lang stok en sy lyf toegewikkel in 'n tamaai reismantel. Tonks staan agter hom in swaargelapte jeans en 'n helderpers T-hemp waarop die woorde *Die Skikgodinne* gedruk is. Haar borrelgompiekenk hare skitter in die sonlig wat deur die stasie se vuil glasplafon val. Langs Tonks staan Lupin in 'n lang verslete jas oor 'n armoedige langbroek en trui, sy gesig bleek en sy hare nog gryser. En heel voor staan meneer en mevrou Weasley in hul beste Moggelklere en Fred en George, albei met splinternuwe baadjies van 'n heldergroen, skubberige materiaal.

“Ron, Ginny!” roep mevrou Weasley uit en kom haastig nader om haar kinders te omhels. “O, en Harry, skat – hoe gaan dit?”

“Goed,” jok Harry toe sy hom styf vasdruk. Hy sien oor haar skouer hoe Ron na die tweeling se nuwe klere staar.

“Wat is *dit* nogal?” vra Ron en wys na die baadjies.

“Die beste draakvel wat daar is, kleinboet.” Fred gee sy ritssluiters 'n plukkie. “Ons doen sake dat dit hop en het onself 'n bietjie bederf.”

“Hallo, Harry,” sê Lupin toe mevrou Weasley hom los en vir Hermien groet.

“Hallo,” sê Harry. “Ek het nie verwag . . . wat maak julle almal hier?”

“Wel,” sê Lupin met 'n effense laggie, “ons het gedink ons sal 'n bietjie met jou oom en tante gesels voor hulle jou huis toe neem.”

“Ek dink nie dis 'n goeie idee nie,” sê Harry dadelik.

“O, ek dink dit is,” grom Moodie en hink nader. “Dis hulle daardie, hè, Potter?”

Hy wys met sy duim oor sy skouer. Dis duidelik dat sy toweroog

deur sy agterkop en hoed na hulle kyk. Harry leun effens na links om te sien waarna Maloog wys en sowaar, daar staan die drie Dursleys geskok en staar na Harry se verwelkomingsparty.

"A, Harry!" Meneer Weasley draai weg van Hermien se ouers wat hy so pas hartlik gegroet het en wat nou heurte maak om vir Hermien te omhels. "Wel – is almal gereed?"

"Ja, ek skat so, Arthur," sê Moodie.

Hy en meneer Weasley neem die voortou en stap deur die stasie na die Dursleys, wat vasgenaai bly staan. Hermien wikkel haar uit haar ma se omhelsing en volg hulle.

"Goeiemiddag," sê meneer Weasley vriendelik vir oom Vernon toe hy voor hom gaan staan. "Dalk onthou jy my? Arthur Weasley."

Aangesien meneer Weasley ongeveer twee jaar gelede die grootste deel van die Dursleys se sitkamer feitlik in puin gelê het, sou Harry verbaas gewees het as oom Vernon hom vergeet het. Oom Vernon word 'n helderpers kleur en gluur na meneer Weasley, maar hy sê niks, waarskynlik omdat die Dursleys besef hulle het te doen met 'n oormag van twee teen een. Tant Petunia lyk verskrik en verleë tegelyk. Sy kyk die hele tyd om asof sy bang is dat iemand wat haar ken haar dalk in hierdie geselskap sal sien. Dudley doen sy bes om klein en onopsigtelik te lyk, maar faal jammerlik in sy poging.

"Ons het gedink ons wil 'n paar woorde met julle wissel oor Harry," sê meneer Weasley nog steeds glimlaggend.

"Ja," grom Moodie. "Oor hoe hy behandel word wanneer hy by julle is."

Oom Vernon se moestas bewee van verontwaardiging. Hy wend hom tot Moodie, dalk omdat die bolhoedjie hom verkeerdelik laat voel dat hy 'n gelyke is.

"Ek was onbewus daarvan dat wat in my huis aangaan enigiets met julle te doen het –"

"Ek sou sê alles waarvan jy onbewus is, kan 'n paar boeke volmaak, Dursley," grom Moodie.

"Dis nie die punt nie," val Tonks hulle in die rede. Dit lyk of haar helderpienk hare tant Petunia die heel meeste grief, want sy maak haar oë toe eerder as om daarna te moet kyk. "Die punt is dat as ons moet uitvind dat julle goor was met Harry –"

"En moenie 'n fout maak nie, ons sal weet," sê Lupin gesellig.

"Ja," sê meneer Weasley, "selfs al laat julle nie vir Harry die feletoon –"

"Telefoon," fluister Hermien.

"Ja, laat ons net 'n fluistering hoor dat Potter hoegenaamd mishandel word, dan sal julle betaal," sê Moodie.

Oom Vernon swel dreigend op. Hy is so kwaad dat dit lyk of selfs sy vrees vir hierdie potsierlike groepie mense oorskadu word.

“Dreig jy my, meneer?” sê hy so hard dat van die verbygangers omkyk en na hulle staar.

“O ja,” sê Maloog, in sy skik dat oom Vernon dit so vinnig gesnap het.

“En lyk ek vir jou na die soort man wat hom sal laat intimideer?” blaf oom Vernon.

“Wel . . .” Moodie stoot sy bolhoedjie terug sodat sy rollende magiese oog duidelik sigbaar is. Oom Vernon spring geskok terug en tref ’n bagasietrollie met ’n pynlike slag. “Ja, ek dink so, Dursley.”

Hy kyk van oom Vernon na Harry.

“Nou, Potter . . . laat weet ons hoe dit gaan. As ons vir drie dae agtereenvolgens niks van jou hoor nie, stuur ons iemand . . .”

Tant Petunia kerm jammerlik. Dis duidelik dat sy bevrees is oor wat die bure sal sê as hulle hierdie spul mense in haar tuinpaadjie moet sien.

“Tot siens, Potter.” Moodie druk Harry se skouer met sy knoetsrige hand.

“Mooi loop, Harry,” sê Lupin sag. “Laat hoor van jou.”

“Harry, ons sal jou so gou moontlik daar wegkry,” fluister mevrou Weasley en omhels hom weer.

“Sien jou,” sê Ron angstig en skud Harry se hand.

“Binnekort, Harry,” sê Hermien ernstig. “Ons belowe.”

Harry knik. Hy kan nie die woorde vind om vir hulle te sê wat dit vir hom beteken om hulle almal hier by hom, aan sy kant, te sien nie. Hy glimlag en lig sy hand in ’n vaarwelgroet. Toe draai hy om en stap uit die stasie na die sonverligte straat, terwyl oom Vernon, tant Petunia en Dudley agternadraf.